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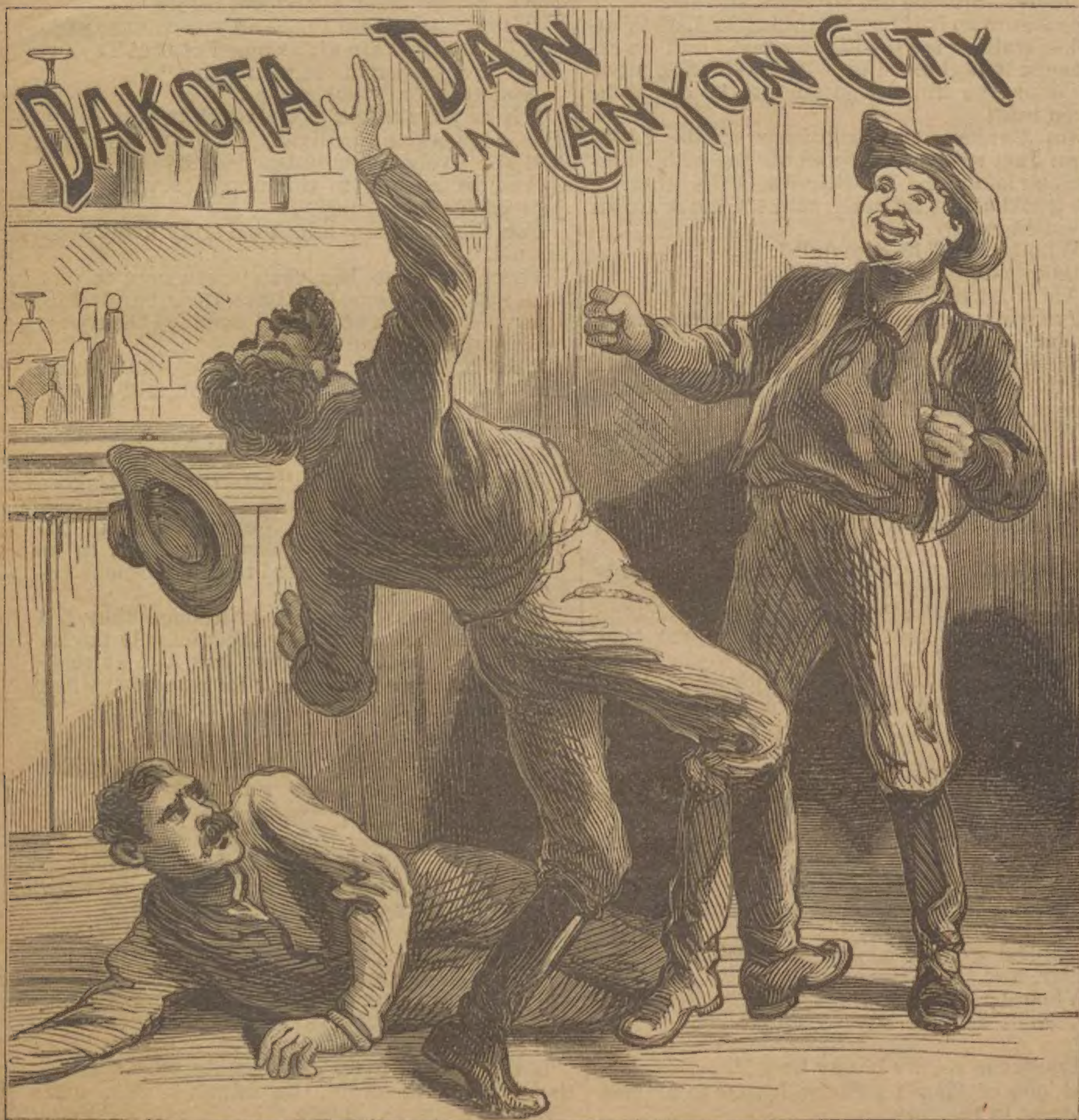
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THE OVER-CONFIDENT VOLUNTEER WAS KNOCKED END OVER END.

By Philip Warner.

Dakota Dan in Canyon City;

OR,

COLORADO KATE'S CHECK.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,

AUTHOR OF "PATENT-LEATHER JOE," "LITTLE
TORNADO," "ALWAYS ON HAND," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A CHALLENGE EXTRAORDINARY.

THE door of the Little Brown Jug Saloon flew open with a bang.

At a bound a man leaped to the middle of the floor.

"Whoop!" he shouted. "Hyar I am ag'in!—the rampagious, ring-tailed ruction! Gaze on me, gents! Size me up, an' reach fur me!"

The men who had been lounging in listless attitudes, waiting for the nightly revel and its excitement, straightened up with awakening interest. Was the dull monotony of the day to be broken into?

Ham Burgess, the proprietor of the Little Brown Jug, rose from behind his bar with a bottle in one hand, and a corkscrew in the other.

He gazed at the intruder with the black frown of a sullen nature.

"Who be you?" he demanded.

"Dakota Dan, at your sarvice."

"An' what in Cain do ye want hyar?"

"I've come to clean out your dirty leetle camp, stranger!"

"Waal, you'd better begin next door."

"I thought that this hyar mought be the head-center of the burg."

"You'll find that it's worse'n that, ef you don't dry up your dog-gone foolishness an' dig out."

"Eh? That thar begins to sound nateral. You have the look of a purty likely man to begin on."

"D'ye want me to come out to you an' throw ye through the door?"

"That's jest what I'm hungerin' fur!"

"Waal, by hokey! you'll git it, an' that mighty suddent!"

And dropping his bottle and corkscrew, Ham strode out from behind his bar, looking as if he could eat the stranger who had challenged the camp.

"Whoop!" yelled the other, again. "Watch me, gents! See how I finish him off! It's a twist o' the wrist, an' over he goes!"

Ham Burgess "made" for him with a vicious thrust.

"Take that, you blatherskite!" he cried.

"Out on a fly!" laughed the stranger in return.

A skillful parry, a slug straight from the shoulder, and Ham "went to grass."

"Whoop! Hain't you got no more meat fur me? Don't send a boy to mill. Whar's yer men?"

"Hyar's fur ye, my bonny buck!"

And one of Ham's patrons leaped to his feet and joined in the fray.

"No love-taps, pardner!" cried Dakota Dan,

"Send 'em home hot, like rolls from the bake-shop!"

"Hyar's fur a roll, then!"

"Eh? That thar's a leetle mistake o' yourn, ain't it, mister?"

And catching the new volunteer's right on his left, he let fly a counter like a thunderbolt, crying:

"Look out fur this scorcher!"

The over-confident volunteer was knocked end over end, until he fetched up under one of the tables.

By this time Ham Burgess, raging like a mad bull, was on his feet again, and "went" for the intruder for all he was worth.

"Dot an' carry one!" laughed Dakota Dan. "That thar shanty don't cost you nothin'. But this hyar is gittin' slow. Ain't thar no more of ye that's bankerin' fur a leetle fun? Come, come, gents! Try to make it lively fur a stranger as never struck your town before."

"By gum! ef that thar's all you want to make you happy, you kin git as much of it at Taylor's Bend as anywhar in the mountains."

And another "took a band."

"Now ye're talkin'! Oh, reach fur me, gents! I've come across the divide jest fur to see ef you had any lively communities over hyar."

And in answer to this appeal several more jumped for the stranger.

For the next few minutes a truly lively scene ensued.

There were no less than seven men to one; and yet they seemed to have their hands full. He knocked them about and tumbled them over one another like ten-pins.

"Git hold of him!" shouted one who had felt the irresistible impetus of his "bunch of fives."

Two jumped for him at once.

One was knocked sprawling; but the other got his hold.

Then it promised to be "all day" with Dakota Dan.

Clutched on all sides, he was borne to the floor, where he rolled his assailants about in as fine style as he had knocked them a moment before.

But numbers prevailed. Although they fell over one another until he was completely buried under their bodies, yet they had him at their mercy, and were punishing him severely, when there came an unexpected interference.

CHAPTER II.

A QUEER FISH.

"HOLD on, gents! This hvar's gittin' to be too much of a good thing! Man to man's the square thing; but I'll be hanged ef I'll stand an' see a mob set down on a better man than they've got in the place."

And up from the corner where he had sat unobserved sprung one who had thus far taken no part in the scrimmage.

Seizing whoever happened to be uppermost, he threw Dakota Dan's assailants to the right and left.

Before others could interfere, he had dragged the whole pile off of the intrepid Dan, and "snaked" him to his feet.

"Stranger, this hyar, to my way o' thinkin',

is a good place to git clear of," he said, as he squared himself to meet a furious onset in which every man in the room seemed to have joined.

Yells and execrations resounded on every hand; but brushing the blood out of his eyes, Dakota Dan laughed.

"Whoop! this hyar's what I call jest a leetle chunk out o' Paradise! Pardner, you know how to handle yourself, I'll be sworn! We two air enough fur all these cusses kin fetch on. Let's polish 'em off, now we've started on it."

Catching up a chair, he dashed it to the floor with sufficient force to break it to pieces; then seizing a leg, he dealt about him with a dexterity that soon made an abundance of sore heads.

"Whoop! I've come to clean out yer camp; an' the spillin' of this hyar ranch into the streets is only the first bite in the pie!"

Now the battle began again, a dozen to two.

But they were two exceptional men. They had muscle; they had skill; above all, they had nerve!

"Now, then! Both together! One more charge, an' we'll put 'em on the outside."

They made the charge—a furious assault, and those terrible chair-legs did terrible execution, for the floor was soon paved with men.

"Now for a clean-out!" and Dan, dropping the chair-leg, seized one of the roughs nearest the window. The Queer Pard, apparently without the least feeling or excitement, grappled the body on the other side.

"Now, give him the grand bounce!" shouted Dan, and out of the shivered sash went the now howling man.

Another quickly followed, and another until six had been piled on top of one another out in the street.

This was too much for the rest of the now demoralized crowd, who, as fast as they regained their senses and their feet, fled through the back door with bloody heads, yelling with fury and pain.

The rout was complete. Dakota Dan was for following them.

"Let us put the whole camp in our breeches pockets!" he cried. "Did you ever see such coyotes?"

But the other was more discreet.

"See hyar, pardner—you ain't yerself," he protested. "Them galoots is an ugly gang. They'll soon fetch more o' their own sort; an' they'll stamp us out. You hyear me? I know 'em of old!" and seizing Dakota Dan by the arm, he fairly dragged him away.

Dan was about to resist, for he was in that state of liquor in which a man refuses to listen to the plainest dictates of reason, when he for the first time looked squarely at the man who had come so opportunely to his assistance, and saved him a drubbing that he might not have got over in a day.

Perhaps it was the magnetic gaze of the stranger. Anyhow, Dakota Dan submitted to be led away.

As expedition was necessary to escape, they "cut and ran." After the exhibition of their metal which we have just seen, there was nothing discreditable in this.

Once clear of Taylor's Bend, Dakota Dan turned and looked his companion over again.

"Blow me!" he said, with a laugh, "but we're a pair of assorted sizes!"

The stranger smiled grimly, but made no verbal reply.

He was long and lank, where Dakota Dan was short and dumpy. He had long, straight black hair, and a drooping mustache, which heightened the effect of his gaunt face, dark, sallow complexion, and hollow eyes, while Dakota Dan was as fresh as an apple-blossom, with sandy hair that curled close to his head. His face was round—just the face for good-nature. He always swore that he couldn't keep the pucker out of it. On the other hand, it looked as if the stranger never smiled. And he spoke in a deep, sepulchral voice which seemed to come from the depths of his hollow stomach.

"Beg yer pardon, pardner," said Dakota Dan, with a merry twinkle in his eyes, "but didn't you never have a squar' meal?"

"Am I so thin as that?" asked the stranger, with a far-away look.

"You do look hungry, an' that's a fact. I'll be hanged—ef you'll pardon me!—but it makes me feel uncomfortable jest to look at you. I say!—come with me, an' I'll fill out yer waist-band, ef it takes all the commissary department o' Canyon City. I don't mind tellin' of ye that I've taken a likin' to ye."

The stranger extended his hand.

"I can heartily return the compliment," he said.

"Then we're pards—eh? Is it a go?"

"If it suits you."

"Put 'er thar fur the war!"

And the two men struck hands on it.

"But what's your handle, pard?" asked Dakota Dan.

The stranger looked away from him with a dreamy light in his eyes.

"Eh!—what's the matter with him?" thought his interrogator.

As he did not seem about to reply, Dakota Dan kept on to cover the awkwardness of his strange silence:

"Over to the States I used to hail to the name of Dan Lowden; but out hyar in the mountains they call me Dakota Dan. What did you say I might call you, sir?"

The use of the title "sir" at once caught the stranger's ear, and he understood its significance. In the rough-and-ready good-fellowship of the West, no one uses this formality where there is to be any intimacy of friendship.

He turned quickly and looked at the man who had withdrawn his hand with sudden coldness.

"Beg pardon! No offense!" he said. "Call me Saunderson—George Saunderson."

"Waal, Saunderson's a good name to go to bed with, as names go," said Dakota Dan, at once recovering his cordiality.

And again they clasped hands—this time with apparent frankness on both sides.

CHAPTER III. SAPHEAD SAM.

"Ho, Dick!"

With one hand on the windlass, the speaker leaned over the mouth of the mine shaft, and shouted lustily.

From the depths of the earth came back a hollow reply:

"Hallo! What's the row now?"

"Hyar comes Dakota Dan."

"All right! I've no objections."

"But he's comin' in bloomin' style. A spring-wagon an' four-in-hand!"

"The deuce you say!"

"Yes. Come up. You never seen nothin' to beat it. The boys air showin' up all 'round. I reckon they're goin' to give him a boom."

A mumbling sound came up from below, as of some one muttering to himself. Then came the order:

"Haul away!"

A shaking of the rope that disappeared in the darkness of the well showed that the speaker had got into the bucket.

"Bear a hand hyar, Sappy!" cried the first speaker, Shep Lambert.

Sappy—or Saphead Sam, as he was called—grinned in the painful way that indicates imbecility of mind, and promptly grasped his crank, while Shep seized the one at his end of the windlass.

Presently the bucket rose to view, bearing a man in the rough dress of a miner, with a burning candle stuck to his hat by a piece of moist clay.

Unlike Shep, who was a rollicking blade, with his hat always cocked on one side, Dick Mosier was a wizen little specimen of humanity, with a shrunken body, and a halt in his gait, while his face wore a sour, irritable expression.

He frowned and blinked his eyes, dazzled by the broad light of day.

"Is that him?" he asked, looking away to where a cloud of dust was rolling up behind a perfectly "stunning outfit," from the point of view of the mines—four spirited horses drawing a light "democrat" wagon, in the one seat of which sat Dakota Dan and his new pard.

"What's that thing he's got with him?"

"Blow me ef I know?" replied Shep—a question and answer that had passed between many others of the boys.

Then, followed by Saphead Sam, they made their way toward the center of the camp, where Dakota Dan was already tasting the delights of popularity.

A crowd of the "boys," constantly increased by fresh arrivals, were gathered about, shaking him by the hand, and slapping him on the back, according to their degree of familiarity.

But they were greatly interested in the horses too. They lifted their feet, and examined their teats, and stroked their necks and flanks, all the while peppering the lucky owner with a running fire of questions and observations.

"Hallo, you old rooster!" shouted Shep, striking his palm into Dakota Dan's with a report like the crack of a pistol. "Whar have you been this dog's age? A-linin' of your pockets, too, I'll be blowed!"

There was nothing of inquisitiveness in this, but only hearty congratulation.

On the contrary, the corners of Dick Mosier's face were drawn down with envy, as he whined:

"Whar in thunder did you make sich a raise? Money must stick to your hide like fleas to a dog's back."

"Never you mind, Limp-an'-go-fetch-it!", cried Dakota Dan, cheerily. "It ain't none o' your money, an' don't ye furgit it!"

The crowd laughed—not at the halt that had secured Dick his descriptive title, but because of the well-known fact that money never seemed to stick to his hide, nor indeed to any other part of his person, for any great length of time.

"Waal, boys," said Dakota Dan, "to tell you the downright truth, I've been goin' about the country breakin' banks."

"Burglarizin' of 'em?" asked Limpy, in an effort to "git squar'."

"Faro banks, my son!" said Dakota Dan. "Not the kind that made you leave the States without stoppin' to pay your wash-bill!"

Again the crowd laughed.

"Don't you go fur to chin it with Dakota Dan," said Shep Lambert. "He'll floor ye every time he reaches fur ye!"

"The loudest bray always goes with the longest ears!" retorted Dick.

The impartial crowd now laughed with Dick as heartily as they had laughed at him.

Dakota Dan generously joined them.

"Hal hal hal Tally one fur Limpy! He fotched me thar, sure!"

But now another claimed his notice.

"What! you, Sappy?" he cried, turning to grasp the hand of the incompetent.

"Yes—me!" replied Saphead Sam, bobbing his head repeatedly and grinning his delight.

He stood with his head thrust forward in the painful way peculiar to imbeciles, and laughed with the jerky ejaculations with which they express mirth.

"He! he! Sam's powerful glad to see ye! I knowed it was you when you fu'-t struck the grade. He! he!"

"By jingo, Sappy! thar's some good in that thar knowledge-box o' yourn yit!" exclaimed Dakota Dan, patting his head with the blunt patronage of one of his rough good-nature.

"Thar's them as lays claim to a good deal more savy than you do what don't know their friends when they see 'em."

"Say!" ejaculated Sam, suddenly advancing his lips close to Dakota Dan's ear and dropping his voice to a confidential whisper, though he glanced at Saunderson in a way that directed every eye toward him, and even pointed at him.

"Who's that thar! Is he your friend? I don't like the look of him, I don't!"

Saunderson had alighted from the wagon, and stood a little apart from the crowd, with folded arms and knit brows, his eyes fixed on vacancy. It was plain that he took no interest in what was going on about him. In his deep abstraction, his gaunt face was peculiarly somber and forbidding.

"What's the matter with him?" asked Dakota Dan, willing to humor the imbecile's conceit.

"He's too still. Look out fur them still kind. He's all quiet enough now, but at night— Say!"

Sam interrupted himself with a sharp ejaculation, while his eyes grew suddenly larger, as with fright, and his voice more hoarse with mystery.

The men who had caught the drift of the imbecile's words drew nearer, and followed the

direction of his gaze with gathering frowns of suspicion.

"Waal, what is it?" asked Dakota Dan, with a touch of annoyance.

"You know the ugly feller that comes prowlin' around sometimes, makin' eyes at me? I've told ye about him."

"What's he got to do with my pard?"

"He's o' that thar kind! Sometimes thar is two of 'em, ur three, ur half a dozen. Reckon, now, this hyar might be one of 'em. They're still, like him, in the daytime; but at night—at night, when it gits dark, ye know, an' the thunder sw'ars, an' the lightning hisses, an' the wind yells, an' the trees cry an' shiver an' run away, an' the ole mountain turns over in its sleep—then they're—"

He paused, stared at Saunderson, then put his lips close to Dakota Dan's ear, and ejaculated with startling energy:

"Devils! Yes! yes! yes!" he reiterated, rapidly. "At night you kin see the horns stickin' up through their hair!"

"Dry up yer infernal nonsense!" growled Dakota Dan, pushing the imbecile away, as Saunderson at this moment looked in his direction.

He encountered the dull, suspicious frowns of the men, who dropped their eyes and turned away in the awkward manner with which men of their class betray to another the fact that he has been the theme of conversation; but he did not seem at all moved by the patent dislike of his partner's friends.

Dakota Dan walked up to him.

"It's time I was givin' you a knock-down to the boys," he said.

CHAPTER IV.

THE UNDERTAKER.

He put his hand on Saunderson's shoulder, and in this friendly attitude turned toward the crowd.

"Gents," he said, "this hyar is my pardner, George Saunderson—a mighty handy man, as the best of you will l'arn, ef you ever give him reason to take hold on ye."

"I am glad to know those whom Dakota Lowden calls his friends," said Saunderson, speaking in the most monotonous of his graveyard tones, and permitting not a muscle of his face to relax.

The boys had to take a second thought before they recognized Dakota Dan under the name of Dan Lowden. The thing was too stiff and formal to suit their notions of good-fellowship. Saunderson did not improve his place in their esteem.

Shep Lambert was the only one who offered him the free hand of fellowship, who leaped upon a box and cried:

"Hurrah for the Undertaker! May he stand by Dakota Dan until his feet go out o' sight behind the swell of his paunch!"

There was nothing of the spirit of a gibe in this. It is customary in the West to nickname men from any personal peculiarity, all in the frankest good-nature.

To call Saunderson the Undertaker was a happy hit; and while the toast was cheered to

the echo, the boys actually felt more kindly toward him.

But his unfortunate mien spoiled it all.

"Thank you, gentlemen," was all that he said; but he said it without the movement of a muscle in his face, save those directly employed in articulation.

"He's mightily stuck up—that's my opinion!" growled Limpy.

"Ye hyear me, gents? That softy's got more in his pate than most folks gives him credit fur!" muttered another.

Dakota Dan felt that his pard had not had a very favorable "send-off." He therefore told at length the business-like way in which he had disposed of the men of Taylor's Bend.

This was good as far as it went, but it was received with little enthusiasm.

That night he took his melancholy friend "the rounds," but he did not "take" with the ladies.

"Where did you strike such a graveyard?" laughed Colorado Kate, tossing her auburn hair back from her shell-like ear with coquetish grace.

She was the belle of Canyon City and did and said pretty much what she liked.

"Why, you ought to cotton to him," said Dakota Dan. "I thought that blondes were always taken with brunettes."

"The rule don't apply to *strawberry* blondes," laughed Kate, saucily, "unless they are of the masculine persuasion!"

And she gave Dakota Dan's sandy locks a tweak with her finger as she ran away.

Dan laughed.

"We're both off the same piece, my beauty!" he called after her; "and that's enough to make me happy!"

While the smile of admiration was yet on his face he turned toward Hank Sullivan, the proprietor of the "boss" lay-out of Canyon City, and cried:

"Waal, ole man, air ye ready fur me?"

"Wudden't I be ready fur all me fri'nds?" asked Hank.

"But you onderstand when I open on ye I propose to take ye in, body an' breeches!"

"That's roight fur yez. Faith, I'm niver so happy as whin I'm bein' tuck in by a gintleman loike yersilf."

"You've heard o' my luck? I've come to Canyon City fur a big dash, an' then I'm goin' tackle onto Colorado Kate, yonder, an' settle down fur life."

Hank smiled, but it was a rather sickly effort. The fact was that he had had a presentiment of coming evil, and the conviction grew upon him, when he heard of Dakota Dan's unprecedented run of luck, that he was destined to "clean him out."

"He will, unless I fix him!" he muttered to himself, as he gazed after Dakota Dan, who was moving off jauntily. "At midnight, is it? Divil swape me but I'll do it! Och, murder! what will become o' me sowl, I dunno, av the Ould Boy ketches me at it."

But shortly before midnight he slipped away from his establishment on an errand that boded no good to Dakota Dan.

The night was a forbidding one for such an

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enterprise as he had undertaken. The sky was covered with hurrying clouds, and the abrupt appearance and disappearance of the moon through occasional rifts, filled the wilderness with restless shadows, while the muttering of the thunder up among the peaks made the canyons re-echo with weird sounds.

A hundred times he was on the point of turning back to the security of the camp, with its lights and companionship. But every instinct of cupidity urged him on; and with the first and second fingers of either hand crossed, and tracing the holy symbol on breast and forehead, while he muttered prayers to the saints, and repeated charms against the power of the Evil One, he crept forward, starting at every unexpected sound and movement.

Further and further into the mountain wilderness he penetrated, his blood running cold, his teeth chattering, his hair standing on end, when suddenly a tall, gaunt figure loomed directly before him!

Shrinking from it with extended hands, the fingers spread, he stared at the horror with distended eyeballs.

The flying rack for an instant unveiled the moon, and revealed a wildly-desolate gulch, in the midst of which these two stood face to face.

One remained speechless, motionless, looking coldly into the eyes of the terrified Irishman.

He uttered a shriek of horror.

"The Undertaker!"

He did not believe that it was Saunderson in the flesh, but only his spiritual presentment. All of the half-whispered stories, their eerie significance eked out by side glances of dread, which had floated about the camp, rushed upon his mind; and half-dead, he fell upon his knees.

The ghostly light which had shown this portentous specter was as abruptly blotted out, leaving all in darkness.

CHAPTER V.

HOCUS-POCUS.

"WELL, what is the matter with you?" asked a voice out of the darkness, with a touch of impatience in its hollow tones.

"Och, murther! the saints betune me and harrum! Whatever has come to me at all, at all?" whined Sullivan. "Av at pl'aze yer reverence, sure it's mesilf that niver done no one the taste av a han's-turn o' harrum! Don't put the spell an me!"

"Don't be a fool! What do you take me for?" demanded the Undertaker, contemptuously.

"Be the soul o' me body! an' is it yersilf, Misther Saunderson? Blessed be God, sor! sure I thought it were yer ghost!—saints defin' us!"

A brighter interval of moonlight had revealed the Undertaker more clearly.

"An' phwat would yez be doin' heur in such a b'aste av a noight?"

"What are *you* doing here?"

"Mesilf is it? Arrah, thin! phwat is it but an achin' tooth that I have, that bad ye'd think I'd go crazy wid the pain av it. Phwat do I do thin? Faith, annything fur a divarsion. I go wandering about till ye'd think I had the load av Shan Dhu an me sowl!—God forefind!"

"Very well. I won't interfere with your exercise," said the Undertaker, dryly.

And he coolly walked on.

"Now, be the sowl o' me fut, phwat will the loike av him be doin' heur!" mused Sullivan, gazing after him.

The Undertaker was wrapped in a long cloak, which flapped in the wind, giving his retreating figure a weird appearance.

"Sure, it's lift-han' cousin to the devil he is, at the l'aste calkillation!" muttered Sullivan, with a superstitious thrill. "I wondher would he be knowin' to phwat I have on hand?"

Still there was a vein of practical skepticism running through the Irishman's religion and superstition. His animal courage was not easily daunted. Money urged him on, and he persisted.

Assured that the man he had encountered was in the flesh, his only fear of him was that he might follow him and spy upon his actions.

Against this he took precautions, following the Undertaker some distance, to be convinced that he had no notion of turning back.

The Undertaker never so much as looked round.

Sullivan thereupon returned upon his previous course, now advancing more boldly, with a sort of defiance of the invisible powers.

Just about midnight he came to a glade in the heart of the mountains, shut in by crags tumbled about in the wildest confusion.

Here he found a rude tent, made of buffalo-skin stretched upon a semi-circle of saplings so as to be a mere shield from the wind, leaving the front open.

Before this structure burnt a fitful fire, which now flared up, illuminating the interior of the tent and the circumambient crags, and anon died away, until all outlines became merged, so that objects were only distinguished as lighter or darker spots with no definite shape.

From a tripod hung over the fire a pot, from which an odor of simmering herbs greeted the nostrils, whenever the shifting wind bore it that way.

Sullivan approached until he stood within ten feet of this fire, when he paused until a flurry of wind fanned the embers into flame.

Their lurid light fell red upon a figure that crouched under the shelter of the tepee, such as it was.

It was the figure of an old Indian hag, who sat with her knees drawn up to her chin and clasped by her skinny arms.

She was dressed in a raglan of scraps of parti-colored calico and skins, tricked out with feathers and wampum and stained quills, and with dried insects and reptiles dangling from every point. In a word, she was an Indian enchantress, whose native ugliness was enhanced by every available art, to inspire the beholder with superstitious dread.

She sat as motionless as an old heathen idol, blackened by time.

She was known as Washikitwa, and was reputed to be a hundred and fifty years old. It was believed by many that she could "pow-wow" disease out of the body or into it at will, and that from her could be procured charms for almost any purpose—to work ill to an enemy, or to win the love of one's heart's desire.

Sullivan had heard all about her in many a midnight grouping of marvel-mongers. He was now to put her skill to the test.

When he had assured himself that she sat there as he had been led to expect, and that there was no one else in the vicinity, he advanced boldly, yet respectfully, until he could have touched her with his outstretched hand.

She made not the slightest motion to indicate that she was conscious of his vicinity. She might have been asleep. Her eyes were closed.

"But phwat n'ade has the owld divil av eyes," reflected Sullivan, "whin the loike av her kin see out o' the back av her head as aisy as wan av uz wid our two p'apers peeled as cl'ane as inions?"

At the feet of the hag stood a bark receptacle not unlike a rude basket, save that it had no handle.

Into this the Irishman dropped a coin known in the West as "two bits."

It produced no perceptible effect on the seeress.

He dropped in another and another and yet another, with an interval between each reluctant sacrifice of money.

"Divil sw'ape the owld h'athen!" he muttered within himself. "Faith, she's the wan that's knowin' the vally o' silver! Be this an' be that! av she don't come roun' purty soon, sure I'll grab it out ag'in."

However, he dropped a fifth coin into the basket, when, like the darting forward of a snake's head, her hand shot out and clutched his wrist.

So unexpected was this move, and so like the grip of some animal's claws was the clasp of her skinny fingers, that the Irishman shrunk away with an only half-suppressed yell of alarm.

But she held him fast with a strength of which her attenuated frame gave no promise. Indeed, she drew him toward her, and passed her other hand over his face.

He could not repress a shudder, as an icy chill shot through his body.

"Oh, musha! whatever will become o' me, wid the han' o' the sha divil an' me sowl foriver mo-ur?"

"St!" sibilated the hag, with a hiss like a serpent's.

Then speaking in English, yet with a marked Indian accent, as if she had learned but a few words by rote, she went on:

"Lizard's tongue—fry in skunk's grease!"

Into those words she contrived to infuse a devilish malignity by the manner of their delivery. Then she flung his hand from her, and returned to her former position.

Glad to escape, Sullivan took himself off as fast as his heels could carry him, stumbling over the broken ground.

Reaching the camp, he never stopped until he had rushed into his saloon, diving into the crowd as a frightened animal plunges into the heart of the herd for security.

"What's the matter with the man?" shouted Shep Lambert, who had just been dancing a quadrille with Colorado Kate, with very remarkable balancing and swinging of corners. "He's seen a ghost, I'll sw'ar!"

It looked not unlikely. He was as pale as

death, an icy sweat was oozing from every pore, his eyes bulged, and he trembled and panted with fear.

"Will yez have done?" he cried, angrily.

And going behind his own bar, he drank two glasses of neat brandy without water.

The boys crowded around him, plying him with awkward questions to answer; but he parried their curiosity by only swearing at them.

"I've seen a man look like that when he had dropped his meat out in the dark!" said Dick Mosier, as a feeler.

Others caught at the idea. Had the Irishman killed his man? There was nothing improbable in that.

"Ye'd betther stop till mornin' before ye go out to look fur it," said Sullivan.

But even as he spoke his jaw dropped, and his face assumed a set expression.

The boys turned toward the direction in which he was staring.

The Undertaker was just entering the door at the further end of the room.

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNPOPULAR MAN.

AT sight of him a dead, frowning silence fell upon the crowd.

Not appearing to notice the effect of his entrance, he took up his stand in a corner, out of the way of every one, and folding his arms, silently overlooked the dancers.

What was the baleful influence of his gaze? It seemed to magnetize every one that it rested on.

The women grew pale and nervous, and gazed at him timorously while they clung to the arms of their escorts. Then with slight shudders of dread, they asked to be taken off the floor.

"What's the matter with ye?" growled Big-Fisted Frank, who was not in the humor to lose the dance for which he had "planked" his two bits.

"I can't dance with that monster looking at me!" replied his more sensitive partner. "Ugh! I believe he has the gift of the evil eye!"

In two minutes' time the floor was deserted, and the musicians—a fiddler, a cornetist, and one who wrestled manfully with a violoncello that groaned and wailed as if in mortal agony—stopped and stared in wonderment.

The Undertaker stood staring straight before him, like one who was immersed in thought so profound as to make him oblivious to what was going on about him.

"He don't see nobody!" whispered one of the women. "Jest look at him! He don't know this minute that we've quit dancin'!"

"Waal, by Judas! it's mighty nigh time that he did know it!" cried the dissatisfied miner.

"Bounce him!" suggested Limpy, with the venomous snarl of a snappish cur.

"That thar's jest what we're boun' to do!" said the Big Fist.

"Hold on, gents! This hyar ain't right," interposed Shep Lambert. "Remember, that's Dan's pard."

"An' is he to sp'ile our fun jest because he happens to be Dan's pard, I'd like to know?"

"But what has he done to you, or anybody?"

"The ladies won't dance with him a-lookin' at 'em. Ain't that enough?"

"Nonsense! Can he do 'em any hurt only lookin' at 'em?"

"Ask them that question. All I've got to say about it is, that I'll be eternally blasted ef I'll have my fun knocked in the head by any galoot that walks on two legs!"

The angry miner raised his voice defiantly, as he shook his head from side to side. He meant to attract the Undertaker's attention. He glared at him, awaiting even so slight a provocation as a glance.

Had Saunderson looked that way, he would have demanded what he was staring at, and then proceeded to pour out a flood of abusive epithets upon him.

But the Undertaker did not give him this opportunity. He stared straight across the room at the opposite wall.

Finding himself in a hopeless minority, for others joined with the Big Fist in expressions of dissatisfaction, Shep said:

"Stop glowering at him—your ugly mugs are enough to drive the devil out of your company!—and I will go an' git him out o' the room quietly."

"I don't care how ye git him out, so long as the dance goes on!"

"Ef the time ever comes to set down on you," said Shep, with an angry look at the Big Fist, "I hope that George Saunderson may be of the crowd that does it!"

"He has his chance, an' you, too, however you want to take it!" retorted the other.

"When I do want to, you bet you'll know it!" said Shep, as he walked off.

He was about to go to the Undertaker and invite him out to look round, when the door of the saloon opened, and in walked Dakota Dan briskly.

He cast a rapid glance about the room, espied his partner, turned round, and with a lighting of the face which showed that he had been looking for him, started in his direction, when Shep call to him.

"Dan! Dan! Look hyar, directly!"

Dakota Dan stopped on the point of addressing his partner, turned round, and then with a look of questioning advanced to meet his friend.

"What's up?" he asked, looking from Shep's flushed face to those of the crowd, and discovering that something was amiss.

"Dan, the boys is talkin' about bouncin' the Undertaker!" cried Shep indignantly.

"The deuce they are!" replied Dakota Dan.

And though he dropped his voice below its usual pitch, there was an incisive ring in it that "meant fight."

His eyes contracted, his lips took a hard set, and his nostrils quivered, as he walked straight forward to the crowd.

"Cheese it, Frank!" said one of his companions in an undertone. "We ain't buckin' ag'in' Dakota Dan, ye onderstand!"

"What's this about my pard!" demanded Dakota Dan, with an abruptness that showed that he was not to be trifled with on that point.

"We can't go on with the dancin' tell he gits," said the Big Fist. "The ladies won't have it."

"Won't have what?"

"Won't have none o' his gawpin'."

"Have you got anything to say ag'in' it?" asked Dan, pointedly.

It would be time enough to interview the ladies after he had had it out with Big-fisted Frank.

"All I've got to say is, that I want the dance I've paid fur!" said the Big Fist, doggedly.

"You shall have it, fur all that my pard will interfere!"

He then turned to the women who looked at him with the submissiveness with which women of their class recognize a master. He had never treated any of them harshly, but they knew that his will was law.

"Well, ladies, what is it?" he asked, the sternness with which he had addressed Big-fisted Frank giving place to smiling suavity.

"Dan, we're afraid of him!" said one of their number, going up to him with a little shiver. "See how strangely he looks and acts!"

"Nonsense! We can't all look alike. Go on and behave yourself, and he won't trouble you."

He then turned to the musicians.

"Come! come, boys! What are you stopping for? I'm in the humor fur a spin myself."

And he filiped his two bits across the room to the proper functionary, and flung his arm about the waist of the woman who had come up to him.

The selection was entirely without thought. He was only thinking of starting things along so as to spare his partner having his feelings hurt. It was chance that put in his way a black-eyed little beauty of whom Colorado Kate was intensely jealous.

The music started up, and everything was in a whirl in a moment; but a pang shot to Colorado Kate's heart, whitening her lips and goading her to a show of reckless gayety.

"Come!" she cried to the man nearest her, who happened to be Shep Lambert, "let us not lose all of this!"

Nothing loth, Shep whirled her away.

"He took her right from before my face!" Kate kept saying to herself, with set teeth. "And she dared to flash her black eyes at me in triumph!"

This was only too true. Bessie Bright-eyes, as the boys called her, was so full of mischief that nothing delighted her so much as to flaunt her conquests in the teeth of a jealous rival.

During the dance she managed by her sprightly chat to keep Dakota Dan's eyes upon her face, until she said:

"Don't you think that an uninterrupted row of red heads around the breakfast table would be a very unpicturesque spectacle to begin the day on?"

He followed the direction of her laughing eyes and saw Colorado Kate.

"Her face is as red as her hair, ain't it?" persisted the minx.

Dan laughed; and Kate saw him!

Then her face suddenly grew white with fury.

Later Bessie Bright-eyes took advantage of a moment near Kate to whisper in her ear:

"I have about convinced Dan that families ought to be contrasted!"

All of this prepared Kate to fall into an error when, having sought her out and made his peace with her, Dan told her of his run of luck, and added:

"I mean to scoop in Hank as a finisher; and then if I can persuade a certain bright-eyed little miss to go to 'Frisco and help me spend my pile—"

"No doubt she will be easy enough to persuade!" interrupted Kate, passionately.

"Do you think so?" asked Dan, with a merry twinkle in his eye.

"Judging from the brazen way in which she has conducted herself this evening!"

And Kate's eyes blazed as they searched out Bessie Bright-eyes, where she was keeping a crowd of the boys laughing uproariously.

"However," she added, viciously, "she is so impartial with her favors that it won't do to take too much for granted."

"What spiteful cats these women are!" chuckled Dan to himself.

Aloud he said:

"I'll trust her!"

Then he laughed light-heartedly.

It was "nuts" to one so fond of teasing as he was, to lead Kate on in the mistake into which he saw she had fallen. All the while she was betraying her partiality to him. It would be all the more piquant when he came to undeceive her.

This seeming confirmation of her fears goaded Kate to frenzy.

"He shall never take her to 'Frisco!" she cried, when he had again left her side.

"That he sha'n't, alanna!" said a voice in her ear; and she turned sharply around to be confronted by the smiling "mug" of Hank Sullivan.

CHAPTER VII.

BOUGHT WITH A PRICE.

"WHAT did you say?" she asked, breathlessly.

"Just phwat you said, my dear!"

"And what did I say?"

"That Dakota Dan shouldn't take that black-eyed hussy to 'Frisco."

"You are very much mistaken. What is it to me—"

"Now, look ye heur, Kitty, mavourneen. Av yez play shy wid me, off he goes to 'Frisco, d'ye moind?—an' the divil can't shtop the loike av him. An' who goes wid um? Who but Bessie Bright-eyes? Didn't he say that same? But av ye're fair an' square wid me, faith we'll putt our two heads thigither, and divil a step does he take out o' this camp wid wan or another."

"How can we prevent it?" cried the girl, desperately, catching hold of the Irishman's arm.

"Just look at that now!" cried Sullivan, with a broad grin of satisfaction.

"Speak! speak!" insisted Kate, shaking him impatiently.

"Phwat would ye be willin' fur to do to k'ape him heur?" asked Sullivan, playing shy the mo-

ment he saw that he had the game in his own hands:

"Anything! anything!" panted the girl.

"Ye know he's had the divil's own run o' luck lately?"

"Yes! yes!"

"An' he's goin' fur to lay fur me whin he gits the feel o' winnin' an um:"

"He told me so."

"Faith, he had the impidence to tell me that same!"

"Well? What of that?"

"It's wid the money he'd be scoopin' out o' me till that he'd be goin' to 'Frisco, d'ye moind? Phwat else?"

"Then don't play with him!"

"Hey? That's a foin' way out av it. Sure, don't I play wid ivery wan that putts his money up?"

"What do you propose to do, then?"

"Me, is it? Divil a bit! Faith, it's phwat you intend to do."

"I have told you, I will do anything to prevent it."

"Anlything?—just annything at all?"

"Anything!"

"Listen, alanna! W'u'd yez ruin the like av him?"

And bringing his face close to hers, the Irishman panted:

"Hab? hab? hab?"

He had risked everything on this woman's jealousy. If she betrayed him, the boys in their resentment might make the camp too hot to hold him.

She started back, paling to the lips.

"What do you mean?" she asked, breathlessly.

"Just phwat I said, no less!"

"Would I ruin him?"

"W'u'd yez be after fur takin' the money out o' his pocket, an' puttin' it into mine? Is that plain to yez, misthress?"

The girl flushed hotly.

"Do you take me for a thief?"

"No."

"What then?"

"Fur a woman in love!"

"I in love—"

"Not wid Bessie Bright-eyes."

He "had" her.

She sat panting.

"Do yez moind phwat he's up to this blessed minute?" asked Sullivan.

She knew only too well that Dan was again in the company of her hated rival.

How he bent over her, when she caught him by the ear and pulled him down to her, so that she could whisper some nonsense at which they both laughed.

"Do you want me to rob him?" asked Kate, in a husky voice.

"Divil a bit! Do yez take me fur a thafe?"

Kate turned sharply and scanned the Irishman's face.

"What are you trying to get at?" she asked, her eyes sparkling with angry suspicion.

Sullivan saw that it had occurred to her that he was trifling with her.

"I'm talkin' business," he said, earnestly, "an' don't ye furgit it! Av you mean business,

we'll go wha-ur we won't be so likely to be overheard as heur. It won't do fur us to be seen to be too thick."

"I do mean business," said the girl, with sudden determination.

"Then slip out o' this fur the matther of a minute or two. I'll m'ate yez ferninst the big pine at the back o' the house."

He went strolling about the room, passing a jest with this one, and a more serious remark with that, until he let himself out of doors unnoticed.

Colorado Kate was at the place of assignation almost as soon as he.

"Well," he said, "now what do you want of me?"

"To begin wid, I want yez to swear niver to give me away. A fool w'u'd know that you could knock me wid the b'ys, av ye let yer tongue run."

"Well, I swear it!"

"Ye. Bible oath?"

And he produced a copy of the Scriptures, dog-eared and coverless, but none the less the sacred volume.

Colorado Kate shrunk back as he thrust it into her hand.

"What's this?" she asked, sharply.

"The Bible!"

"I didn't know that there was such a thing in the camp.

She was only trying to gain time. She had been startled out of her self-possession by being so sharply brought face to face with an oath binding her to she knew not what.

"Whin I want annything bad, I always manage to get it!" said the Irishman.

"But a Bible!"

"Thaur's many a sthrane thing that foinds its way into the hands of wan that kapes a gamblin' house. Sure, it's only the pawnbroker that b'ates us at the loike o' that."

"Where did you get this?"

"From a broken-down parson, that began by runnin' away wid another man's wife, an' ended by blowin' his own brains out, afther he'd run the length o' the divil's highway, dhrinkin' an' gamblin' an' the loike o' that. But whin air yez goin' to swear?"

Kate took the book from his hand and said, with a perceptible shake in her voice:

"I swear not to betray you, whether I do what you wish me to do or not. Will that do?"

"That it will. Now kiss the book, colleen."

She did so with cold lips.

Sullivan then told her of his visit to Washikitwa. He would provide the charm; she was to see that it was administered.

Like most women of her class, Colorado Kate had implicit faith in the occult power of old hags, Gypsies or Indians. She had once seen Washikitwa and been greatly impressed by her hideous ugliness.

"But it won't harm him otherwise?" she asked, breathlessly.

"Not it! Don't ye suppose thim koind knows phwat they're givin' a thing fur?"

Kate stood silent. Loyalty to the man she loved and jealousy of her rival were struggling for the possession of her heart.

Sullivan saw that this was the critical moment. A sudden throb of generous impulse, such as might come to any woman, might lose him all.

"Look ye, darlint!" he said, in a wheedling tone, "it's foine things ye're afther fur loikin'. Phwat would set off yer beauty the loike av the jewels ye've been beggin' o' me this tin wakes? Phwat would be so loike to bring back yer swateheart as to see yez outshinin' the best o' thim by r'ason o' yer ornaments, the same as ye do by natur'?"

"Will you give me the necklace?" cried Kate, clasping her hands.

"Who but you have I been intinding it for, this long toime?" said the Irishman, with the sliding cadences of blarney. "Sure, whaur is the next that 'u'd be becomin' to it?"

He reached for her hand in the darkness, and slipped one end of the necklace into her palm, retaining hold of the other end, however.

"Give it to me!" she cried, trying to unclasp his hand.

"Whin yer work is done, me darlint!"

"Can't you trust me?"

"Sure I can, thin!"

And as if moved by an impulse of confidence, he let go his hold.

The necklace was of pearls. Sullivan had won it from a Mexican rancher. It may have been intended as a gift to his bride!

The girl kissed the bauble and hugged it to her neck, as women caress a kitten, with cooing sounds of affection.

"I'll do it!" she cried.

"Sure, ye will!" corroborated the Irishman.

The bargain was struck. A woman was sold to treachery. The price was the gratification of the two strongest passions of her nature—jealousy and the love of finery!

CHAPTER VII.

SPREADING THE SNARE.

INSTEAD of boarding at the hotel, Dakota Dan had a shanty of his own, which he occupied in connection with the Undertaker.

A Chinaman did their cooking and washing and other household work.

Dakota Dan started out with a house-warming, which was honored by every inhabitant of the camp.

The ladies especially graced the occasion with their smiles, with much peeping curiosity and merry laughter at the quaint arrangements of his "bachelor's hall."

Colorado Kate was particularly gracious to him, and he gave her the post of honor—at which Bessie Bright-eyes made a grimace of mock chagrin.

"But a heathen Chineer!" cried Kate, with a shrug. "He'll poison you!"

"Poison me?"

"With dirt!"

"Oh! That's a woman's notion. But really, Sam is as clean in his—"

"Don't tell me! I know 'em! They keep it out of sight—that is to say, so that a man would not see it. But a woman—Faugh! I say, Dan!"

"Well?"

"You must let me cook you a meal of victuals."

"Will you?"

"Of course I will!"

"When?"

"Whenever you like."

"To-morrow?"

"Certainly."

Dakota Dan was delighted.

"I wish we could git shut of this rout; and you should do it at once."

"To-morrow will be time enough, thank you!"

His eyes were sparkling with pleased anticipation.

She turned pale in spite of herself.

"I've a mind not to eat anything between now and then, so as not to spoil my appetite!" he laughed.

"Do you fancy that I cook so ill that you must be as hungry as a bear to enjoy it?" she asked, covering her agitation with pretended pique.

"You bet I don't! But I know it will be so good that I shall want room to stow away a lot of it."

Kate was mollified.

"But what do you want to cook?" asked Dakota Dan.

"Can you get some rabbits?"

"Any number of 'em."

"Then I'll make you a pot-pie."

"That'll be boss! Say, Kate!"

"Well?"

"You won't mind my pard?"

Colorado Kate hesitated. She did not like the Undertaker. Above all, she was half-afraid of his silent scrutiny.

Suppose he should detect her treachery? She fancied him clutching her wrist, and looking down into her very soul with his black eyes, while not a muscle of his swarthy face moved. She could hardly repress a shudder at the thought.

"He's a good fellow—better'n he looks," urged Dakota Dan. "An' you kin see yourself that he needs a square meal more than any man in the camp. But then, if you'd druther be alone—"

"Oh, no!" interrupted the girl, hastily.

She bridled at the thought that Dakota Dan did not prefer a *tete-a-tete* with her to even the regalement of his partner.

"Look hyar, my girl! You ain't mad?"

"What should I be mad about?"

And she whirled upon him and opened her eyes wide.

"I'll fire him—"

"No, you won't!"

"But really I don't want him."

"Well, I do!"

Dakota Dan felt uncomfortable. Of course he knew that he had "put his foot into it."

Being a woman, Kate punished him mercilessly. She became as gay as a lark, and excessively polite to him. She would not let him say a word further, but drew him into the company of others where it would be impossible to pursue the matter.

But Kate was a woman, and accomplished her ends in a womanly way. She did not want

the Undertaker, and was determined not to have him—

"Unless I am mistaken in the man!" she said, to herself.

She sought him out and forced her society upon him. She was the quintessence of sweetness, and—*how* she "made eyes at him!" If he had been a vain man, he would have thought that he had made a conquest. As it was, he felt decidedly uncomfortable.

He would have evaded her, but she was so persistent that she left no alternative but to submit to be entertained or to literally run away from her.

He frowned and answered her in monosyllables; he fidgeted and looked away from her. But she drew only the closer to him, and put her hand on his arm to fix his attention.

"What do you think, dear Mr. Saunderson?" she said to him, loud enough so that several near her overheard the tender address, and giggled.

Whereupon she flashed a look of pretended indignation at them, turned her back upon them, and lowering her voice, went on:

"I have got your partner to let me come here to-morrow and cook dinner, in the place of that nasty Chinaman; and—and—"

She dropped her eyes, and in apparent confusion reached for the fan which hung at her side, as she concluded in a still lower and hesitating voice:

"I particularly count upon *your* being present!"

She lifted her eyes with a quick, shy glance which completely routed the Undertaker.

"Thank you!" he said, growing red in the face—as red as one of his sallow complexion could get.

"You—you won't—disappoint me?" she asked, with her face half-hidden behind her fan.

"I—I—of course—shall be delighted!" stammered the Undertaker.

Which, being literally translated, meant:

"I'll be hanged if you catch me within five miles of your dinner-party!"

Colorado Kate so interpreted it.

"What have you been doin' to my pard, to make him blush so?" asked Dakota Dan, when he got her alone. "Everybody is making a guy of it."

"Let them! What's that to me?"

"But you haven't answered my question."

"But you haven't given me time."

"Very well! I'm waitin' your good pleasure."

"There's nothing particular to wait for. I have only made him promise to be at dinner to-morrow."

"You thought I wouldn't invite him on the square?"

"I thought it would be better that I should show him that I wanted him."

Dakota Dan was at a loss just how to take her. He had wanted his pard, and he had got him; and yet he wasn't satisfied.

Sullivan, who had been on the watch, was suspicious. He saw Dakota Dan's troubled face, and the almost brusque way in which Kate treated him.

"Look heur, me beauty!" he said to her, with a touch of his native brutality, "you'd ought to

be comin' the honeyfuglin' dodge on him, instead o' playin' offish wid 'um as ye are. Av ye dish my bacon wid yer nonsense, ye'll hear from yours truly!"

"Mr. Sullivan, will you let me run this thing my own way?" she retorted. "If you don't like it, we'll throw off, and you can have your dirty necklace back!"

"Arrah thin, darlint! an' phwat would I do wid it, at all, at all?" cried the Irishman, "coming down" in great alarm. "Sure, the devil fly away wid the tongue that 'u'd say a word ag'in' the way you're managin' it!"

"I don't propose to be run over by swine of *your* make; and I'm about sick of the thing, anyway!"

"Sure ye are!" he agreed, coaxingly. "Bnt thaur! av ye'd be wantin' a dress, or such a matther, to go wid the necklace, faith, who has the betther right?—an' it's Hank Sullivan's money that's buyin' it! Fifty dollars, or aven a hundred, now! Thaur's nothing small about me!"

And he forced a hundred dollars into her hand.

This, together with his humility, had a soothing effect on the injured beauty; and she vouchsafed:

"I am to cook his to-morrow's dinner."

"The devil ye are!" cried Sullivan, in delight.

"Just look at that, now!"

And he gazed at her admiringly.

"Didn't I know yez whin I says to meself:

"Who will be doin' ov it loike cutting butther wid a hot knife but Kitty Terril?"

"But phwat were ye doin' wid the Undher-taker, I dunno?"

"Inviting him to be present at the dinner."

"The loike av him? Faith, ye'll not be feedin' him an'—we know phwat!"

And he winked.

"Attend to *your* part of the matter, and leave me to attend to *mine*!" replied Kate.

"Have it in readiness to give to me to-night."

"Sure will I!"

"And now, the less I am seen in your company, the better."

CHAPTER IX.

TAKEN IN THE SNARE.

UPON repairing to Dakota Dan's shanty on the next day, Colorado Kate found him alone, and in high spirits, in anticipation of what he called their "picnic."

"I made the heathen slick things up like a newly-polished door-knob," he said. "Then I fired him for all day, so that we sha'n't have nothin' to mar the harmony of the occasion!"

"But where is your pard?" she asked, looking about as if in search of him.

"I suppose, now, you can't be happy without that pard o' mine!" said Dakota Dan, with a chopfallen air.

"I could be much happier with him," she was insincere enough to reply.

"Waal, you'll have to make the best of your disappointment, then; for he has made himself scarce."

"Where has he gone, and why?"

"Oh! you needn't look at me in that way, as if you thought that I fired him along with the Chinaman!"

"A guilty conscience needs no accuser!"

"Honor bright, he went of his own accord!"

"Without much persuasion from you not to go, I suppose."

"Waal, if he was bound to go, you couldn't expect me to get down on my marrow-bones an' beg him to stay!"

"Oh! of course not. But what was his excuse for breaking his promise?"

"Why, he was dog-sick. He *looked* sick."

"He always does! But that's enough of him."

She took off her hat with its waving plumes.

"That's a dandy, ain't it!" observed Dakota Dan, taking down a coat of his own and throwing it into a corner, in order to furnish her with a peg on which to hang the affair, which he declared was "fearfully and wonderfully made."

She had a bundle wrapped in a newspaper, "woman-fashion," the corner being brought to the center and pinned.

Dakota Dan stood with a hand on either knee, his eyes flashing and his teeth disclosed by an expectant grin, while she unwrapped it.

"My eye!" he cried, as the throwing back of the corner of the paper revealed a snowy apron, the daintiest and most graceful in cut that he had ever seen. "Whar did you git that daisy? Thar ain't a spot on it, nowhar; an' it's jist as smooth an' white as a snowbank; No heathen Chineeser ever touched *that*, I want ye to onderstand! They do make things as yaller as lemon-peel, don't they? I never thought of it before."

"You may believe that none of those dirty fellows ever touched his hand to it!" exclaimed Kate.

"Say, now! I bet you done that—didn't you, Kate?"

"Of course I did!" she replied. "Who should do it, if not I?"

"Nobody, by the livin' jingo!" cried Dakota Dan, with great enthusiasm. "Thar ain't nobody in this hyar section o' country that could touch one side o' that gay leetle piece o' dry goods!"

"Not a Chinaman, anyway!"

"Did you make it, Kate?"

"Yes, sir!"—with some pardonable pride in her work.

"An' you could knock spots out of a b'iled shirt, I'll bet!"

"You wouldn't lose any money on that proposition."

"I say, Kate!"

"What?"

"You're the nattiest leetle woman I ever knew!"

"Nonsense! How many do you say that to in the course of a year?"

He looked at her with a glow in his eyes that she had never seen there before.

She blushed, and turned away with a nervous feeling.

If the matter had dropped there, she might have broken faith with Hank Sullivan, tossed the lizard's tongue out of the window, and given

Dakota Dan a pot-pie as salubrious as it was palatable. But his propensity to tease got the better of his love for her, and he went on:

"I haven't said it to many this year."

"Maybe cue before this," she said, thinking of Bessie Bright-eyes.

"Not more than one before this!" he answered, laughing.

She set her teeth, and gave the apron a vicious little shake, preparatory to adjusting it about her waist.

She had "laid herself out" on that apron just to show him what a handy little woman she could be when she chose; and it had all come to this.

"Let me tie them strings, Kate!"

"Thank you! I can do it myself."

"Oh! I know how."

"So do I."

"Are you afraid I'll git 'em dirty? I'll wash my hands."

"I won't trouble you."

"What's the matter, Kate?"

"Nothing. What should be the matter?"

"But you seem to git off at me every once in a while."

"Because I won't let you tumble my apron? You're a considerate fellow, upon my word! Do you know how long it took to iron that apron?"

Dakota Dan looked at her helplessly. Before a woman's subtle weapons he was "nowhar!" Like a skilled swordsman, after each thrust she recovered so quickly and gracefully that he only knew that he had felt the keen point of her rapier, but for the life of him could not tell just how the pass had been made.

But when she began to roll up the sleeves of her dress, he was soon lost in admiration of her white and shapely arms.

She cut short his flattering speeches by setting him to work fetching water and whatever else she wanted.

The next hour was full of delightful surprises for Dakota Dan. Everything that Kate did was a marvel of neatness and skill.

He insisted on helping her, but with so little deftness that he only succeeded in smearing himself from head to foot with flour, and doubtless would have dropped the dough on the floor, had she not "drawn the line" there, and prohibited him from touching it.

Secretly Kate enjoyed this as much as he did. It was like what she had imagined a honeymoon would be. Nevertheless she scolded him almost incessantly, in a make-believe fashion that only heightened the fun.

When the pot-pie was cooking, and she had not got a spot on that immaculate apron or anywhere else on her dainty person—greatly to the wonderment and admiration of Dakota Dan, who contrasted his own besmeared and bespattered condition with her freedom from soil—she returned to the paper parcel, and drew forth another piece of spotless linen.

"Why, I thought that that was another apron!" cried Dakota Dan, when she shook it out, and it proved to be a table-cloth.

"How many aprons do you suppose I wear in the course of a morning?" asked the lady, disdainful of his masculine ignorance.

That was deeper into the subject than Dakota Dan had gone; so he only scratched his head, while she spread the white cloth over his rude pine table.

Then he ejaculated:

"Waal, I sw'ar!"

"I see you eat entirely off of silver!" she said, as she put two tin plates bottom-upward on opposite sides of the board.

He threw back his head, and roared until the room rung again, and the lady was fain to put her fingers in her ears, with a grimace of pretended distress.

"How you deafen one!" she exclaimed.

But before she was aware of his purpose, he swooped down upon her, caught her off her feet in his arms, and kissed her. Then he set her down instantly, and stood off with a hand on either knee, looking at her with a half-smile to see what she would do or say.

She said nothing, but stood looking at him breathless and pale to the lips. She had been kissed many a time before, but never like that. She did not know just what made the difference; but it left her panting and frightened, yet thrilled with a divine ecstasy, and with a feeling that she was on the point of bursting into tears.

She had yet to learn that she had been startled by the kiss which a man gives to the woman whom he truly loves. It was the respect in it that was new to her—more's the pity!

"You ain't mad?" he asked.

Thereat a wave of crimson swept from chin to temple. It was the return of modesty with the flowering of a holy love; and with it came the deceit, behind which a woman instinctively hides her glowing heart.

She dropped her eyes and said, somewhat unsteadily:

"Don't do that again!"

Once more the outcropping of his true feelings for her might have conquered her purpose. She had not yet taken the fatal step. The pot-pie awaited him free from any barbaric incantation. But once more the spirit of mischief interposed.

He laughed and said:

"If it had been Bessie Bright-eyes, she would have boxed my ears, and let it go at that!"

Like a flash of lightning her drooping eyes swept up to his face, and she grew white with fury.

"Save such experiments for Bessie Bright-eyes, then!"

And she swept out of the back door of the shanty to the shed where he had his summer fireplace, leaving Dakota Dan staring after her dumfounded.

For a little while his face remained blank. Then the muscles relaxed, and he began to smile and finally to chuckle to himself.

"Jealous!" he said, to himself. "Doggone her leetle skin, she's purtier an' purtier every time she changes her suit! But I'm a-crowdin' of her too strong. It's a blarsted shame, I'll sw'ar! These hyar women critters ain't built o' cowhide an' gristle like us breeched galoots, so it don't stan' to reason that they'd orter be handled so loose an' keerless. I'll go an' make it

up with her. Blow me ef the leetle cuss hain't got me whar I live!"

He followed her out. Her back was toward him. She was busy over the cooking.

"Kate!"

He had got so far, when she took his breath by turning round with a dazzling smile, and saying, as lightly as if nothing unusual had passed between them:

"It's done to a turn. What! you haven't cleaned yourself up? What have you been doing, while I supposed of course you were getting ready for dinner? Don't stand there staring! Do you know that you haven't five minutes to get all of that flour off of you, and to wash your face and comb your hair? You needn't think that I'm going to have an untidy man sit down to table with me, for I'm not used to it, and don't propose to begin at this late day!"

He looked himself over, once more helpless before her lightning-like change of front.

She hustled him into the house, and seizing a whisk-broom—a rarity in Canyon City, except among the "bloods"—began the process of renovation herself, all the time talking to him so rapidly that he "could not get a word in edgewise."

"Now you'll have to do the rest yourself!" she said, bustling him out again—the tin wash-basin standing on a bench outside.

He laved his face, head and neck, splashing the water about like a big Newfoundland dog. Then he rubbed them round and round with a coarse brown towel, but ignored the use of comb or brush on his close-cropped hair.

"Kate," he said, in a more subdued tone than he had used before, "I shouldn't ought to have crowded you so—"

"Nonsense!" she interrupted.

"An' you was foolin', o' course?"

"Will you come in before the dinner gets as cold as a stone? Talk about women! I never saw such a man for chin-music in all of my born days!"

He laughed softly, and followed her into the house!

"Waal, I sw'ar!" he cried, when he caught sight of the table. "This byar's somethin' like livin', this is! A woman's a great institution, hang me if she ain't!"

And the change in the appearance of his rude home that a few deft touches had made was worthy of his praise.

"Sit down! sit down!" cried Kate, fairly pushing him into his seat.

Then she took hers, and began at once to serve him.

She was excited. Her eyes blazed, her hands trembled, and she was very pale. But he attributed it, so far as he gave it thought at all, to pleasurable excitement over the success of her dinner.

With his eyes fixed upon her face, he began to eat.

She sat breathless, watching him with a look in her eyes that vaguely impressed him as strange, it was so glassy.

He kept talking to her, praising the dish.

She did not seem to heed what he was saying,

but at the third mouthful half-started from her seat, with a gasp.

"What is the matter?" he cried, dropping his knife and fork.

"Nothing! nothing!" she answered him, hurriedly, and lowered her eyes. "Go on. Don't mind me."

"But you ain't well. You've overdone yer-self jest to gorge my—"

"No! no! There's nothing the matter with me, I tell you!"

"Then what made you jump so?"

"Well, if you *must* know!" she cried, with a hysterical laugh, "there's a pin sticking into me!"

"Waal, I sw'ar! ef a woman don't beat—Haw! haw! haw!"

And lying back in his chair, he gave vent to one of his roaring laughs.

"I say, Kate!" he cried, when he could fetch breath, "we'll have that thar pin out before we go any further, ef it takes every man in the ranch to find it!"

And he pushed back the chair, as if to go to her assistance.

"Dan Lowden, if you don't stay where you are, I'll—"

"What'll you do?"

"I'll scream! Don't you dare to touch me, sir! There it is now, you mean thing!"

And giving a quick hitch to her dress, she held up a pin, to convince him that it was out without any help from him.

"Now sit down again, or I won't stay with you!" she threatened.

He complied, only observing:

"You hain't eat nothin' yourself yet."

She began to eat spasmodically, but the food choked her. It was not that what she had on her plate contained any of the Indian hag's repulsive prescription. She had put that all on Dakota Dan's plate, the pot-pie itself being entirely free from it. But the thought of her treachery and of his blind confidence brought her heart into her throat.

When it seemed as if she could endure it no longer, and that she must drop her head on the table and burst into tears, or cry out and warn him, they were startled by the sound of some one stumbling over the threshold.

They looked up at the same moment, and saw Hank Sullivan standing in the doorway.

CHAPTER X.

A WOMAN'S HEART.

"CONFOUND his ugly mug!" was Dakota Dan's reflection.

"He has come to see for himself that the thing is done on the square!" thought Colorado Kate. "He might have trusted me!"

"It's beggin' yer pardon I am!" said the Irishman. "Sure, but it's ill-luck that sent the loike o' me to break in on a family gatherin', so it is!"

And he winked at Dan as if the joke were between them.

"No intrusion at all," said Dakota Dan, with the lie for politeness' sake which we all tell perhaps too glibly. "Come in! come in! and we can give you some of the best pot-pie that ever made your mouth water!"

At that the Irishman's jaw dropped, and he looked at Colorado Kate inquiringly.

She understood the look, but was willing to punish him for his distrust of her; so looking him steadily in the eye—a look which might or might not be significant, and if so, he could not tell of what—she seconded Dakota Dan.

"Yes, yes, Mr. Sullivan," she said. "Don't hesitate on my account. Indeed, I shall take it as a slight if you refuse to partake of my cooking."

"It's not an Irishman that 'u'd luck in yer swate face and do the loike o' that!" he replied, gallantly.

Then he crossed the threshold, staring at the pot-pie as if fascinated by dread.

Colorado Kate placed another plate, while Dakota Dan drew up a chair.

"May the iver blessed Virgin spaur me!" muttered the Irishman, as he allowed himself to be placed at the table. "Sure, it's a judgment sint an me!"

"I know that you have an excellent appetite," said Kate, piling the savory viand on his plate.

"Och, murther!" he cried, in dismay. "Do yez take me fur a hog intirely?"

"Nonsense! I've seen you eat before."

"But I'm just afther from 'ating till I'm that full—"

"You'll have room for a mouthful; and after you've eaten a mouthful, you might as well go on and have a good dinner."

He stared at her open-mouthed.

She looked straight into his eyes with what seemed to him a menace.

"Divil sw'ape the loike av her!" he groaned within himself. "Faith, phwat is she afther fur doin' but k'apin' her agreement wid me, feedin' yan omadhaun an' the divil's broth, an' thin makin' all aven by doin' the loike by me? The chairm will work as bod fur me as fur him; an' divil a taste av luck will I have over him fur me necklace an' me hundbred dollars! Och! bod scan till the loike av me, that iver I came heur at all, at all!"

Meanwhile Dakota Dan was laughing—

"You might as well knuckle down. When a woman gives the word, there's no takin' water. She has filled me up until I am as happy as a king!"

The Irishman began to eat, praising the food extravagantly, yet making a wry face at every swallow. Between each mouthful he looked at Kate appealingly; but she appeared to be in gay spirits, and quite ignored his glances.

Perceiving the Irishman's discomfiture, yet at a loss to know from what it arose, Dakota Dan seconded Kate, as she urged more upon their reluctant guest.

"I intend to go fur you to-night," he said; "so it's only fair to give you a good feed to start out on. You'll need it."

"But it's a shame to ate you out o' house an' home, an' thin take yer money aftherwards!"

"Don't mention it! If you clean me out with as little compunction as I shall you— What's the matter?"

"A cramp in me stomick—no less!"

And with a die-away look he dropped his

knife and fork, and clapped his hand over his abdominal region.

"Arrah, thin, darlint!" he said to Kate, "sure you'll be excusin' me—"

"Oh, certainly, if you are really sick."

"It's the quare feelin's I have."

"Take somethin'," suggested Dakota Dan, tendering a glass of spirits.

Thereupon the Irishman did an astonishing thing.

"It's beholden I am to yez," he said, "but that would ould aggravate the matther."

Dakota Dan stared.

"You *must* be in a bad way," he said, significantly.

"It's only in passin' that I bethought me to dhrap in, an' give yez the toime o' day," said Sullivan; "an' now I'll be goin', av it pl'aze ye, wid manny thanks fur yer hospitality."

To one familiar with the effect of the imagination on the body, it will not be surprising that the Irishman was visited by a genuine qualm at the pit of his stomach. He hurried away, bemoaning his untoward luck, and alternately swearing vengeance on Colorado Kate, and pleading with the saints to protect him from the power of the devil and his servant, Washikitwa.

Upon reaching his saloon he took a strong emetic, and passed an hour of utter wretchedness. Then, fearing that this would not entirely relieve his system of the charm, he followed it up by giving the rest of the day to religious devotions.

He left Dakota Dan and Colorado Kate looking at each other and laughing.

"What is the matter with the old fraud?" asked the former.

"How should I know?" responded Kate.

"I'll bet it is some superstition about eating at my board!" laughed Dakota Dan, who was possessed of that hard, practical common sense which does not easily yield to the supernatural. "He's afraid it will bring him ill-luck."

Kate was silent. The smile died out of her face.

"I'll make him look worse than that," chuckled Dakota Dan, following out his own thoughts so that he did not particularly notice her. "He's a surly dog, and he's fattened on the boys until he deserves to have some one squeeze him fur all he's worth."

She looked at him. He held such an easy mastery over the ordinary things of life, suppose he was strong enough to resist the power of the Indian hag and her incantations? A keen regret of what she had done seized her, and imparted a wistful look to her eyes.

Dan saw it, and it sent a wave of tenderness through him.

"Kate," he said, "when I clean him out, as I'm sure to do, I mean to pull out o' this business for good an' all. A man can't be lucky forever. It's playin' hog that knocks the strongest run. But when I've got my pile, I shall want somebody to help me spend it. I've got my eye on a friend o' yours."

"No friend of mine, if you please!" said the girl, lowering her eyes, and striving to prevent the fading of the blood from her face from betraying her.

"Who ain't?" asked Dan.

"The person you are speaking about."

"How do you know who I am speaking about?"

"Haven't you already told me?"

"Not I!"

"Very well. We won't say anything more about it, then."

"Kate, you didn't take no stock in that nonsense, did you?"

"In what nonsense?"

"About Bessie Bright-eyes."

Instead of replying directly, she set her white lips, and said:

"If you have nothing more entertaining to talk about—"

"Hold on, Kate!" he interrupted. "When a woman gits on her high boss, she always rides at such a furious pace that she never sees anything by the roadside. Don't you suppose I've got eyes in my head? Am I the man to ask such a woman as Bessie Bright-eyes to marry me?"

"Marry you!" repeated the girl, breathlessly.

And she looked up at him in a frightened way and began to tremble violently.

"Why not?" he asked.

And going round to her, he threw himself on his knees at her side, and wound his arms about her, repeating, with a great tenderness in his voice, and his eyes once more aglow:

"Why not, my darling? Where have your eyes been, that you couldn't see that it is you I love—that it is *you* alone who can make my home happy and bright as you have made this rough barracks to-day?"

"Don't touch me! Let me go!" she cried, struggling to rise from the chair in which he held her, and tugging desperately to free herself from his clinging arms.

"No, I'll never let you go again!" he cried, laughing at her futile efforts.

Indeed, instead of releasing her, he drew her closer down to him until she felt his warm breath upon her lips.

"I can't! I can't! I can't!" she cried, distractedly, struggling with all her might to keep him at bay, while her heart, like a traitor in the camp, was sapping her strength and giving her over to the enemy.

"But I say you can, and shall!" he persisted, drawing nearer and ever nearer the goal of his happiness. "Why can't you?"

It was not a question asked for information. It was only a murmur of triumphant ecstasy, with his lips hovering so close to hers that he could feel their warmth, yet coquetting with the kiss that he was to have presently, when the delights of anticipation had been exhausted to the full.

"Marry you? Oh, never! *never!*" she sobbed, her heart breaking with the thought of the barrier she had placed between them when her heart's desire was so near.

Yet even as she spoke her face sunk upon his, and her arms closed about his neck, as if by a power not her own, and from her eyes gushed a flood of despairing tears.

"Why not?" he asked again; and into his

voice came a tender gravity that fell like cool dew upon her hot heart.

He thought that she referred to her past life as shutting her out from this happiness which came to other women. And so she did, in part.

"What is it a man wants?" he went on. "Somebody that will love him. Ain't that about the size of it? And you love me, Kate. I don't have to wait for you to say it in so many words."

"Oh! you don't know! you don't know!" she cried.

And with a sudden wrench she tore herself out of his arms and sprung to her feet.

"Kate!" he exclaimed, with a great surprise and a great dread in his voice.

She did not heed him but tore the pearl necklace from her throat, dashed it upon the floor, and stamped upon it.

He stood aghast. Was the girl taking leave of her senses?

"Do you know what that is?" she cried, spurning the bauble again.

"Your necklace. What is the matter with it?"

"It is the devil's bribe! And I have sold my life happiness to him for that miserable thing!"

In a sudden paroxysm of despair she flung herself upon the floor, giving way to such a passion of weeping that he was frightened.

"Kate! Kate!" he cried, kneeling and gathering her up in his arms, "what in the world is the matter with you?"

"Kill me! kill me!" she cried, wildly. "I deserve the worst you can do to me! You don't know what a viper you are holding in your arms! This is no place for such a wretch as I!"

And again she struggled to free herself.

He placed her in a chair, and then holding her by the shoulders so that he could look into her face, said quietly:

"My girl, tell me what this is all about."

"Oh! I can *never* tell you!" she sobbed, trying to hide her face from his searching gaze.

Then suddenly slipping from the chair to her knees, and clinging to his hand, she poured out all the wretched truth, amid broken sobs and ejaculations of self-abasement.

But long before the confession was over he had lifted her to his heart, saying:

"Not that way! Here is your place from to-day on, no matter what lies in the past, or comes in the future!"

When she was done he asked:

"And is *that* all?"

"Oh! is it not enough?" she sobbed. "I have ruined you!"

"You have made my fortune for me by giving me yourself! I'm the happiest man in seventeen contiguous counties, and that's what's the matter with me!"

"But you will lose everything, and through me!"

"I'll risk that, for all the pow-wowin' o' that old humbug! Kate, you done this thing for love of me—because you was ready to break my neck, if necessary, before you would give me up to any one else!"

"Oh! I couldn't bear to have you go away with—with—"

"Of course you couldn't! An' now you see how bad I want you!"

And he chuckled softly to himself.

"Got you that time!—didn't I, sweetheart?"

And he kissed her very gently.

"Dan, I don't deserve this!" she whispered, clinging about his neck with a strength that was like to strangle him; but he voted it a pleasant death to die, and so did not interfere with her.

Then she remembered that she had broken her oath to Hank Sullivan.

"But," she said, "I don't care what comes of it! If I can only be with you a little while like this, I'll take the worst that can possibly follow without a murmur!"

"Waal!" he exclaimed, with huge satisfaction at what her words implied, "they don't put up love much to beat that, I'm thinkin'—not in *this* world, leastways!"

He was not equal to a nice balancing of the circumstances which make an oath more or less binding; but he disposed of the matter summarily:

"I wouldn't trouble my leetle head, if I was you, about a promise given to such a galoot as Hank Sullivan; not to say that we're about as nigh man and wife as they make 'em, short o' the Simon pure article, with the parson an' all the et-ceteras; an' of course thar ain't no secrets between man an' wife! What you want to do is to play off on him that you've got me outside o' his little tid-bit—which the same ain't no lie—an' then we'll flax him!"

After that, time passed on golden wings, so that it seemed as if they had had scarcely a moment together, when the Undertaker made his appearance, and they awoke to the fact that the sun had set!

CHAPTER XI.

"CLEANED OUT."

THE Ace of Hearts, as Hank Sullivan's saloon was called, was packed, it being generally known that Dakota Dan had fixed upon that night to "clean him out."

"Hooray! Hyar he comes!" shouted the eager voice of one on the lookout!

Those who had secured good places to watch the game did not hazard their loss by leaving them; but others who stood near the door forced their way out.

Down the street came a procession formed of Dakota Dan's most intimate friends.

The hero of the occasion walked in advance, his cheerful smile contrasting with the abstracted gloom on the face of his partner at his side.

"Hooray! hooray! hooray!" was the greeting shout sent up by a score of throats.

Hats were tossed into the air, and eager hands were stretched forth on every side to grasp those of the general favorite.

He received the boisterous good wishes with a confident smile, and replied to the chaff that was fired at him in the same jolly vein.

"He's too sure," was the criticism of envious Dick Mosier. "When a man starts out with such a flourish of trumpets, you may look to see him come out at the little end of the horn!"

"You look as if you'd like to sour his luck," muttered one of Dan's friends.

But this was only a ripple, quickly borne away by the strong set of the tide of popular enthusiasm.

There was a crush at the door as the procession entered and forced its way through the room to the faro-table, and the din was deafening.

The ladies waved their handkerchiefs and smiled their sweetest. They had been given places immediately about the table by the gallantry of their host.

Sullivan received "the champion bank-bu'ster," as Dakota Dan had already been dubbed, with the stereotyped smile with which pugilists greet each other at the opening of a mill which doesn't happen to be sold.

"It's wishin' you good luck," he said, but a little nervously.

"Is that square, Hank?" asked Dakota Dan, with a peculiar smile.

"Well, av coorse I'm not fur wishin' the money out o' me own pockut; but av ye kin get it, ye're mightily welkim to ut, the same as anny other gintleman."

"Exactly. Waal, then, what are to be the terms o' the game?"

"Just annything at all that's fa-ur."

"It's stand to the rack until one or the other of us is clean bu'sted?"

"I'm agreeable."

"No limit to stakes?"

"Only that you're not to double when ye lose."

"Of course. I haven't come hyar to rob ye!"

"Nobody'd think that."

"Very well, then! Go ahead with your rat-killin'!"

Dakota Dan unslung from his belt two buckskin bags, of which one had rested on either hip.

"That's my pile, gents!" he declared, as he flung them down upon the table with a bang.

A shout went up at sight of them, and eager eyes glistened on every side.

Hank Sullivan looked at them covetously, yet with a secret sinking of the heart.

If they contained gold, its value must be in the neighborhood of twelve or fifteen thousand dollars.

Dakota Dan untied one, took it by the lower corners, and with a tip let the yellow tide flow out upon the table.

Again the room rung, this time with a half-frenzied yell. The men gave themselves over to the fascination of that glittering dross. Some flushed purple; others turned livid with excitement.

Dakota Dan, who was perfectly self-possessed, sat down and built several piles on various cards of the "lay-out."

Into his eyes came a clear, steady light—a keen, alert watchfulness. He was oblivious to everything about him save the game he was playing.

At his back stood the Undertaker, with folded arms, silently overlooking the scene, yet with eyes that did not seem to note what they rested upon.

"That hang-dog cuss will kill Dan's luck, as sure as you live!" growled one of Dakota

Dan's friends, with a sullen frown. "I'd jest as soon set down with a skeleton lookin' over my shoulder!"

"Cheese it, will you?" muttered Shep Lambert. "I reckon Dakota Dan knows what he's about, as well as you kin tell him."

But those who heard the first remark frowned in sympathy with it.

"Whether the galoot is all right or not," rumbled another, "he shouldn't ought to chance it when thar's so much up."

"We'll have to bounce that rooster fur good, one o' these fine mornin's—you hyeer me?" added a third.

A general growl was the response in his vicinity.

In the midst of these men stood Saphead Sam, the imbecile. The patronage of Dakota Dan and the good-natured indulgence of the boys enabled him to get as good a place as any one. And now he drank in their words, open-mouthed; and his love for Dakota Dan was quick to take the alarm. However, he waited for older, and as he rightly felt, wiser men than himself to take the initiative steps for his protection.

Meanwhile Hank Sullivan was slowly, yet skillfully shuffling the deck.

On his right hand sat his croupier. On the left sat Colorado Kate.

Just before the opening of the game he had interviewed her.

"It's all square?" he whispered, hurriedly, his eyes ablaze.

"I did my part," she had replied.

"He ate it? You swear it?"

"Yes."

"But, death to my sowl! ye gave me the same dose!"

"Don't be a fool!"

"Phwat's that?"

"I tell you he ate it all. There was nothing in what I gave you. Didn't I eat the same, and do you suppose that I fancy such a dainty as you prepared?"

"Kate, alanna, you swear this?" Don't de-save me, colleen!"

"I have not! Now go along!"

He had looked searchingly in her face. She had stood the ordeal without changing color; but in order to do it, she had had to affect anger.

"You are such a snide yourself, that you suspect every one else of the same."

"Thaur! thaur, darlint!" he had replied, soothingly. "I bel'ave yez. Come! Ye shall have the best s'ate in the room. An', hark ye!—av I cl'ane 'um out, be me sowl, I'll add a bunnit till the dress; do ye moind?—an' a ribbon ur two till the bunnit—eh?"

Thus assured, he had gone to the task of the evening, and she had taken up her post at his elbow, never to take her eyes off his hands, after the exchange of one lightning glance, full charged with the electricity of love with Dakota Dan!

Trust her love-sharpened glance to detect any fraud on the part of the dealer, if he dared to attempt it. And she would cover his heart with her revolver and unmask him—she was fully resolved on that.

But Hank Sullivan was too knowing a bird to set such a trap and spring it himself. He knew that every one of Dan's friends had an eye on him. He trusted to the natural chances of the game in favor of the bank, and to the charm of the Indian hag.

It seemed as if some influence of this kind were at work; for from the very first he won steadily; though of course Dan won many of the turns.

The contents of the first bag went over to the side of the bank.

Dakota Dan coolly rolled his cigar to the other corner of his mouth, untied the second, and rippled its jingling coins over the board.

Sullivan was jubilant, though he strove not to let his face betray the fact.

"Bedad! the colleen was honest wid me," he thought. "The chairm is workin'—loike a chairm!"

On the other hand, Dakota Dan's friends, who had come in full confidence that he would "walk away with Hank Sullivan from the word go," were furious, and, furthermore, suspicious of some malign influence.

"Didn't I tell you he was blowin' too loud?" chuckled Dick Mosier.

"Bah!" growled Burt Younger, who stood at the head of those who were ready to back Dakota Dan through fire and water. "It's that vampire yonder!"

And he glowered blacker than ever at the Undertaker.

Saphead Sam's jaw dropped, and he looked from the speaker to Saunderson. It was evident that he was "taking it all in," though nobody noticed him.

"I tell ye what it is, boys," pursued Burt, "we ain't doin' the squar' thing by Dan, lettin' the thing go this hyar way!"

"What do you propose to do about it?" asked a man at his elbow.

"Fire that galoot out an' give the man a show!"

"Dakota Dan won't stan' that. He's boun' to back his pard till the last dog's hung."

"Then he might as well throw his money into the street! That's all I've got to say about it."

"Look a-hyar, gents! this is all foolishness," interposed Shep Lambert. "You hain't got nothin' ag'in' Saunderson but his looks; an' he's as han'some as the most o' you, any day!"

"Would you have that walkin' graveyard standin' over ye when *your* money was up?" demanded Burt.

"Waal, I allow it wouldn't do no hurt ef I did."

"That's purty fa'r fur a slide-out!" sneered Younger.

And he was not the only one who felt that Shep had avoided answering *yes*, or *no*.

Big-fisted Frank laughed tauntingly.

"Fight it out among ye!" he said. "But, all the same, we're ahead!"

Meanwhile the contents of the second bag were melting away.

Colorado Kate was a prey to an anguish of remorse that blanched her lips.

"It is my fault!" she moaned within herself. "My hand has brought this upon him! Oh! Dan! Dan!"

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And she could scarcely restrain her tears.

So the second bag of gold passed slowly but surely across the table to the side of the bank.

When the last stake was up the eager spectators held their breath.

Several turns were made without affecting Dan's bet.

The excitement grew more and more intense. All necks were craned forward. Every eye was riveted on the box.

At last appeared the card on which Dakota Dan's last stake was piled.

The bank won!

There was a moment of profound silence. Then the whole room burst into an uproar.

Cheers and inarticulate yells rose among Hank Sullivan's friends; but they were in the minority; and the angry ejaculations of the partisans of Dakota Dan overawed them.

There was a surging of the closely-packed crowd as they instinctively arrayed themselves into parties. Then they stood eye to eye, with a fight hung on a hair-trigger.

"Gentlemen!" protested Sullivan, "hasn't everything been fair and above-board? Phwat is it you complain of? Wasn't my money up ag'in' his?—an' the cairds decided it!"

Colorado Kate's heart ached with the burden of its secret. It seemed as if she must spring to her feet and cry out:

"No! no! it has *not* been fair!"

But she knew that Dakota Dan, having entered upon the game with a full knowledge of the conditions under which he did so, would not take advantage of the revelation she could make, and would only be annoyed by her interference.

Dakota Dan himself rose and turned toward the crowd, saying, calmly:

"Gentlemen, this is all out of place. I hope that my friends will remember that this is *my* game—thanking them, of course, for their sympathy."

"Sure, you're the gintleman that'll say that I have taken no advantage of ye," suggested Sullivan.

"The deal has been perfectly fair, so far," admitted Dakota Dan.

Then he turned to a man who had stood neutral in the excitement that had just prevailed.

"Congar," he asked, "what should you say was a fair estimate of my turn-out?"

"Hosses, harness, and wagons?" asked the man addressed, in deliberate, deep-chested tones.

Of course he knew that that was what was meant, but it was only his habit of gaining time before expressing his decision.

"Everything," answered Dakota Dan.

Congar rolled his quid into the other cheek, and after a moment's reflection, said, slowly:

"Waal, ef I was tradin' in hosses—the which I ain't, not jest at present—an' ef I had the money—which the same I'm a long ways from havin'!—I'd ventur' mebbey eighteen hundred on the outfit. Ef I had cleaned you out o' the snug leetle pile that's on the board thar, I'd allow ye the even two thousand, at the least calculation. Gentlemen, is that thar fa'r?"

He appealed to the crowd to pass upon his arbitration.

Murmurs of approval came from all sides.

"The hosses alone is worth an even thousand dollars a span, in rope halters!" declared Burt Younger.

"Call it fifteen hundred," said Dakota Dan, quietly. "I paid more money for 'em; but I ain't beggin' nothin' because I'm down. What do you say?" he asked of Sullivan.

"I'll make it two thousand," he replied, magnanimously. "I don't know nothin' about the valley o' hosses meself; but Joe Congar wouldn't tell no lie about it—I know that; an' I'll stan' be phwat he says."

"Fifteen hundred will be enough, said Dakota Dan, quietly.

And to the croupier:

"Put that amount on the queen for me, if you please."

This was done, and the game was about to progress, when Burt Younger interposed.

"Hold on, Dan! I reckon your friends has got a word to say. We're all agreed. This hyar thing can't go on no longer as it's been goin'!"

"What is the matter?" asked Dakota Dan, turning toward them calmly.

"Ef you'll jest step this way, the which we'd druther not spit it out in meetin' without your leave."

Dakota Dan went apart with him, with a questioning look in his eyes.

"It's the Undertaker," he said, without preface. "You can't afford to have him stan'in' over your shoulder like he's been doin'!"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Dan. "Haven't you got over that tom-fool notion yet?"

"Waal, ef you say so!" exclaimed Burt, shrugging his shoulders, offended at the way in which his good offices were received. "It's your money!"

"It is my money!" said Dakota Dan, raising his voice so as to address the crowd; "an' I say, once fur all, that I won't hear to this thing!"

"That settles it!" said Burt.

And putting his hands into his pockets, he walked back to his place.

"The man's bewitched!" he growled, as he passed once more among those who had sympathized with him in his suspicions.

Saphead Sam drank this in open-mouthed, as before. He looked at the speaker, who was a leading man in the camp—then at Dakota Dan, and lastly at the Undertaker.

Saunderson stood as when he first entered the saloon. If he was at all moved by the losses of his pard, he did not show it by word or look. He had not protested when the least of Dakota Dan's friends was roused; he had not taken sides when it looked as if they were coming to blows over the matter.

The game was renewed; and once more Dakota Dan was "cleaned out."

His friends now stood in silence, looking at him as at a man who had brought ruin upon himself by his own obstinacy.

"Whar's his pard, that he don't plank him a stake?" asked Burt of those around him.

The fact was that the Undertaker hadn't a cent in his pocket. Another man might have express-

ed his inability. Saunderson said nothing, and so became the victim of a misunderstanding that hurt his standing with the boys more than anything else could have done.

"Will the ladies oblige me by withdrawing?" asked Dakota Dan, without a change in the quiet expression of his face.

They stared at him, for the moment at a loss.

Colorado Kate caught his eye, and rose.

Her example was followed by the others, and they went out, wondering what was about to happen.

The crowd too stood agog.

CHAPTER XII.

THE TABLES TURNED.

"You will excuse me, gentlemen!" said Dakota Dan, with a faint smile.

Thereupon, to their astonishment, he proceeded to undress.

"What is it?" cried Burt Younger.

"A prize-fight!" suggested Dick Mosier.

"He'll want a man of his size, then," said Big-fisted Frank, giving the impression by his tone and manner that he would be willing to stand as Sullivan's champion.

"I'm not on my muscle, if that's your game," said the proprietor of the Ace of Hearts.

A thrill of eager expectancy ran through the room. Nothing ever interested the boys more than a square knock-out.

Bets were the first thing in order on an occasion of that kind.

"Two to one on Dakota Dan, no matter who tackles!" cried Burt Younger.

He always held it the first duty of a gentleman to back his man, no matter what the prospects of success.

Not heeding the crowd, Dakota Dan stripped "to the buff," and piled his clothes on the far-table.

"Put up whatever you like ag'in' them," he said, coolly.

Sullivan stared.

"Hold on!" cried Big-fisted Frank. "You ain't boun' to do no sich bloody thing as that! Luck is luck, an' won't stan' everything. The gentleman is tryin' to get a dead open-an' shut."

Hank Sullivan's friends all united in this protest; and even Dakota Dan's felt that their champion was "crowdin' the mourners;" so their support was not so hearty as it would otherwise have been.

"Still," persisted Dakota Dan, quietly, "I think Mr. Sullivan will accept the bet."

"An' turn ye naked into the street? Not I, faith! Annything in r'ason—I stan' by that."

And the Irishman's indignation was beautiful to behold.

"What's the matter with it?" asked Dakota Dan.

"No gentleman would take the clo's off another's back."

"Oh! you needn't have any tender consideration for me, if that is all."

"Moreover, as our fri'nd heur said, luck wouldn't stan' it, an' you know that well enough."

"Then it's your own pocket you're lookin' out fur, after all?"

"Only to the point of what's r'asonable an' fair. I don't take advantage o' no man, an' I don't want no man to take advantage o' me."

"Ah! I understand you to say that it is a question of fairness?"

"That's whaur I shtond!"

"Will the gentlemen fall back as fur as possible, an' allow me to have a word with Mr. Sullivan in private?" asked Dakota Dan, going round to the other side of the table.

They complied, wondering what influence was to be brought to bear on the Irishman to move him from the position in which public sentiment upheld him, while every consideration of self-interest was against "tempting luck" in this unheard-of way.

Sullivan waited apprehensively.

With a peculiar smile Dakota Dan walked up to him and whispered into his ear:

"How about that lizard's tongue, my Christian friend?"

"Fur the love o' God!" gasped the Irishman, starting back as if stung by a scorpion.

He turned livid, and stood quaking in every muscle.

The boys stared at him in utter astonishment. What could be the purport of the half-dozen words that could have such an effect as they saw?

"Phwat do yez knows about that?" asked Sullivan quaveringly.

"Everything," replied Dakota Dan, coolly.

"Who told yez?"

"A little bird."

"Thaur could he but wan."

"You're sure about that?"

"An' it's perdition on her sowl!"

"On her soul? What are ye talkin' about, man?"

"Didn't she swaur?"

"What?"

And with his lips to the Irishman's ear:

"An Indian hag? Hal ha!"

Then aloud:

"But, come! this ain't to the point. Do you accept the bet, or don't you?"

Sullivan looked at his opponent.

An unvarying smile that unnerved him rested on Dakota Dan's lips. He read there the alternative. He knew that if the thing was "blown," the boys would not leave of his establishment one slab leaning against another!

"If the cairds goes ag'in' ye, ye'll stan' it?" he asked.

"Certainly," answered Dakota Dan.

"An' not squeal?"

"No."

"Nur—nur blow?"

"Nor blow."

"I'm takin' it, an' thankin' ye kindly!"

He was completely "broke up." The boys wonderingly saw that.

"It's something snide! You may bet on that!" growled Burt Younger.

"Then Dakota Dan'd orter let us into it," said another.

Sullivan saw that his credit was undermined even without a word. The black frowns of suspicion told him that he had made a paying investment in silencing Dakota Dan's tongue, whatever came of it.

"But that sha-divill! Bod scan till her! she thricked me afther all! Wait till I get the weight o' me hond an her!"

The game was renewed, and from this point Dakota Dan steadily won, until he had got all his own back, and stranded Hank Sullivan high and dry!

The Irishman had not a dollar in the world that he could call his own, nor a thing save the clothes on his back that he could turn into money.

"I don't want to send you out into the world without a stake," said Dakota Dan, and he handed him a hundred dollars.

His friends refrained from cheering as the defeated man walked out of the saloon that at the beginning of the game had been his, but was now the property of his adversary.

CHAPTER XIII.

A GLIB TONGUE.

CANYON CITY was shrouded in gloom, beneath which smoldered a fever heat of excitement.

Immediately upon his great success, Dakota Dan had installed his partner in the Ace of Hearts. There he had sat every night since like a wooden man, sliding the cards out of the box to the right and left as if his movements were controlled by machinery.

"Ye hyear me, gents?" Burt Younger had said, when on the first night the whole camp had visited the place to see how he managed—"this hyar ain't the fu'st time that gay and festive cuss has handled the pasteboards!"

"Not much!" was the general assent.

"Waal, then," said Shep Lambert, "that only goes to prove what I said at first. Dakota Dan knowed his man better than you could tell him."

"He's mighty lucky—*ef it's all luck!*" whined Dick Mosier.

"Yesterday you was growlin' because he wa'n't good-lookin'; an' now you've all got the bellyache because he knows how to deal! I'd like to know what kind of a man would jest suit you!" cried Shep, in high dudgeon.

"Jest you wait—that's all I've got to say!" muttered Burt.

"Ef thar ain't some powder burnt in this hyar shebang one o' these fine days, I lose my guess!" said Mosier, watching Burt Younger out of the corners of his eyes.

"It's mighty good fun playin' in the fire—*ef you don't get singed!*" retorted Shep, the flash of his eyes giving a peculiar significance to his words.

There the matter dropped for the time.

The next day Dan failed to make his appearance, and upon inquiry it was learned that he had taken to his bed, sick.

"It's a little queer that his pard should keep so close mouthed about the matter until it was fairly pumped out of him," said Dick Mosier, in his insinuating way.

"That thar ain't the only dog-queer thing about this hyar fine gentleman!" chimed in Burt Younger.

Thereupon the boys called upon Dan in a body.

They were let in by his Chinese servant, Sam

Ling, who stood beside the door with his junk shoes set at an exact angle, his hands clasped before his blue smock, and an exceedingly smug and innocent look on his face.

"Hallo, boys!" said Dan, with a pleased smile, as he looked down the long line of his friends, all wearing that decorous expression of countenance which people assume at a funeral. "It does a man good 'way down in his boots, to see that his friends don't furgit him the minute he's laid on the shelf."

"What's the row, ole man?" asked Shep Lambert, cheerfully.

"Nothin' to count. I only feel a leetle shaky in the underpinnin'."

"You look blue around the gills, an' that's a fact," said Burt Younger.

"I'll be all right in the mornin'."

"You'd orter have a doctor," suggested Dick Mosier.

"My pard's handy about them things. He says he'll give me a sweat to-night that'll fetch me out o' byar all straight as a string."

This intelligence was received in dead silence. Everybody's face dropped, except Shep Lambert's. He frowned his displeasure and began to talk in a lively strain.

But Dakota Dan did not "come round" the next day, nor the next; and when it appeared that he was really "booked" for a spell of sickness, the ladies made it up among them to call upon him, and see that he was comfortable.

They came with a great fluttering and chattering, "like a flock of white black-birds," as he laughingly told them. But he was disappointed to find them marshaled by Bessie Bright-eyes; and as they filed in, his eager gaze left each face in turn for the next, in a vain quest of Colorado Kate.

Every day since the first he had waited for her with a heartsick feeling of neglect. Why had she not come to him the moment she knew he was down? Would he have treated her so?

He had chafed and fretted, which made him only the worse; until now, at the first rustle of skirts, he had raised on his elbow, all aglow to feast his eyes upon her, with a feeling that only the touch of her cold palm on his burning forehead would make him well again; or if not well, at least so happy that he would forget the discomfort of imprisonment and pain.

When he saw that she had not come, he fell back with something between a groan and an oath, and lay with closed eyes.

The women ran to him with cries of dismay. Then he rallied and talked to them with forced gayety, telling them that he had only been shamming, just to see how much his friends really thought of him.

"I'll always know who they are after this," he said. "Tell that coquette, Colorado Kate, when you see her, that I have got her down in my black book!"

"Why, don't you know?" cried Bessie Bright-eyes.

And her face lighted up with the eagerness of a gossip who unexpectedly finds that no one has been beforehand with her in imparting a rare bit of news.

The other ladies smiled with sympathetic surprise.

"Know? Know what?" asked Dakota Dan, with a sudden thrill at the heart.

"Just see that!" cried Bessie Bright-eyes. "Those stupid fellows never told him!"

"Just like the men!" murmured one of the ladies.

"Ha! ha! ha! That comes of having a pard that wears boots!" laughed the butterfly. "What do you fellows ever talk about I should like to know?"

"If you would do less talkin' an' say more," cried Dakota Dan, "I wouldn't have so long to wait before I could make out what this is all about!"

"In two words, then—*Kate's gone!*"

"Gone?" cried Dakota Dan, starting again to his elbow.

"Gone! Vamosed the ranch!—cut the camp!—shook all of her friends!—got!"

The sportive minx bobbed her head at each statement of the fact, smiling in high fun.

"Gone!" repeated Dan. "When? Where? What for?"

"When? Why, let me see! I'm blessed if it wasn't the very night you took to your bed! Did you ever think of that, ladies? He's pining for the loss of her. Ha! ha! ha!"

And quite unconscious of Dakota Dan's distress, she made the room ring with silvery laughter.

"Go on! Tell me all about it!" cried the sick man.

"Where? Was that next? Well, that's one of the things that she left those particularly interested in her whereabouts to find out. She didn't give me her address."

"Then you don't know why she left?"

"What does a lady ever leave for? Of course, to better herself. For particulars, see small bills. In this case, Bill Hart!"

"Hank Sullivan's side-pardner?"

"You've guessed it! Who told you?" laughed the "giddy girl." "He raked her off the board with his usual grace. But say, Dan!—is it true that she tried to get you not to play with Hank, the day you scooped him in so completely?"

At that, Dakota Dan sprung upright in bed, and began to swear so furiously that the ladies—who, more's the pity! were not altogether unused to that sort of thing—shrunk away from him in dismay.

"Why, is it possible that you—that you—care?" cried Bessie Bright-eyes.

"Care!" shouted our tortured hero, and he thought of the tender passages of that, to him, blissful afternoon—all an infamous "sell" on her part.

Was ever such fiendish perfidy? How she had hung about his neck—how she had given her lips to him, half-shrinking, half-yielding, like a young girl with her first lover! And behind her angel's mask was a devil of deception. After that, could a woman ever be believed?

"Care!" he cried, grinding the word between his teeth and shaking his clinched fist. "Let me git my clutch on his throat an' hers! That's all I ask!"

And he threw his legs out of bed, with the

evident intention of getting up at once and setting out on his revenge.

The ladies ran screaming out of the shanty—all but one, who had more presence of mind or more determination.

Bessie Bright-eyes took the sick man by the shoulders and forced him back.

"Look here, Dan!" she exclaimed, "this won't do! You're in no state to be on your feet at all, not to think of going out of the house. I am sorry that I said anything; but I never dreamed that it was anything to you."

A cloud had come over her gay face, and her voice was low and vibrant with feeling, as if the discovery that it *was* something to him had shaken her heart with pain.

He submitted to her will, not merely yielding to the physical weakness that made his head swim, but suddenly prostrated by the conviction of how poor a thing revenge is where the heart has been wounded as his had.

"I might drain their hearts all round; but would that give me back the woman I believed her to be? Oh, Kate! Kate! I loved you so!"

And he turned his face to the wall, that the woman might not see the tears that no effort of his manhood could wholly repress.

She went on, as if she thought that, like a woman, he would wish to know the particulars.

"I wondered why it was all done so slyly—why they didn't take the coach. But I suppose they were afraid of being followed. It was the merest accident that I saw them—slipping away in the night on horses."

"It was after midnight. Tom Coleman was with me, and we had gone up to the gulch to Kennedy's dance. Tom got so full that on the way back he insisted on camping out by the roadside; so I had to leave him and come on alone."

"Of course I was terribly frightened to be out there alone at that time o' night; so when I heard some one stirring, I crept into the bushes all a-tremble."

"It was a man and woman, leading some horses into the road."

"I was on the point of speaking to them to get them to come on to camp with me, taking the chances of their not thanking me for my interference, when I recognized Kate's voice; and she was so nervous and excited that I guessed at once that there was something up."

"He'll kill me if he ever gets his hands on me!" says she, while he was helping her on her horse.

"Then the man spoke, and I knew it was Bill."

"He'll find that two can play at that game!" says he.

"She was so nervous and in such a hurry to get away, that as soon as he got her into the saddle she started up. He overtook her just as she came opposite me, and she says:

"I've got on my best dress," says she; "but you'd better believe I wasn't going to let myself be seen walking off with a bundle under my arm. I hated to leave that blue silk, though," says she. "You'll have to get me another just like it. I had half a mind to slit it to ribbons, so that none of those hussies should have the benefit of it!"

"That's what she said, as spiteful as could be,

"But," continued the narrator, interrupting herself, as if she had for the moment allowed herself to forget Dakota Dan's interest in the woman she was telling him about, "I ought not to tell you that."

"He told her that she could have as many dresses as she wanted, but it would be a long way before she got another necklace to throw away; and she said she was afraid of something—I couldn't hear what, for they passed out of earshot."

So ended Dakota Dan's idyl of a day in the lackness of treachery and fraud.

"Put your hand under my pillow," he said, huskily.

Bessie Bright-eyes obeyed, drawing forth a small package wrapped about with buckskin and tied with a string of the same.

"Don't open it," said Dakota Dan. "Do you know whar the water goes down in a sink-hole, about half a mile up the gulch? I mean the little stream that comes down through the rocks."

"Yes, I know," answered Bessie.

"Waal, I'll be greatly obliged to ye, ef you'll throw that package down thar fur me. I may never be out to do it myself, an' it ain't everybody that I'd like to trust to do it fur me. Don't let the job out to nobody else. Do it yourself."

"I will," replied the girl, with seeming earnestness and sincerity.

"An' now I won't be keepin' ye any longer," said Dakota Dan.

She hesitated, and then putting her hand lightly on his shoulder, said, hesitatingly:

"I haven't hurt you, have I?"

"No! no! you have been very kind," said Dakota Dan, without turning his face so that she could see it.

She went out slowly and softly, and he was alone.

He drew up his knees, covered his face with both hands, and so lay perfectly still, save for a slight quivering of his body.

The girl went—almost ran—straight to her room, opened with fingers that trembled with eagerness the package she had promised not to violate, and gazed with glistening eyes upon a broken pearl necklace.

"Well," she cried, exultantly, "that's as cheap jewelry as I will ever get in this world! Hank Sullivan can whistle for it!"

And she snapped her fingers, and laughed.

CHAPTER XIV.

SAPHEAD SAM TAKES A HAND.

THE boys now insisted on Dakota Dan's having a doctor; but he swore savagely.

"What in thunder do I want to be pawed over fur by a galoot that doses ye with drugs to make ye sick, so's to feed ye on bread-pills afterwards, an' give yo a chance to get well in spite of his draughts and blood-lettin'; an' then calls it a miraculous cure? Thar ain't nothin' the matter with me; an' if thar is, it's my own lookout," he went on, with the inconsistency of an irritated man. "My pard's nursin' me to my likin'. Then what is it to the rest of you?"

In this he unintentionally misrepresented the Undertaker.

It was true that Saunderson was tireless in his attentions to his pard, turning out at any time in the night to give him water or his simple herb tea, which at most was expected only to allay his fever. But he pretended to no knowledge of the treatment of disease, and confessed his entire ignorance of what ailed his patient.

He had urged the need of a doctor, but Dan had insisted that there was nothing the matter with him but malaria.

"Hang his pard!" growled Burt Younger, impatient at this persistent faith in the man whom every one else vaguely suspected.

"Thar's one thing that thar ain't no mistake about," said Dick Mosier. "He come hyar as thin as a rail, an' he's been puttin' flesh on his bones ever sence, as fast as Dan shook his off."

Shep Lambert laughed scornfully.

"He's gittin' better lookin' eh? An' still you're not happy! We'll have to git up a leetle world fur your especial benefit, whar a man sha'n't be long nor short, old nor young, good-looking nor homely. But, by thunder! ef they rule out cranks, it's my opinion that none o' you won't stand much show."

As a fact, the Undertaker had fleshed up wonderfully, while Dakota Dan was becoming so emaciated that, as the boys said, it would take two of him to cast a shadow. It was as if they had changed places in this respect.

It was noticeable, too, that he had become more cheerful, or, rather, more animated. When he set out in the morning—he had a trick of rambling off by himself among the crags—he walked with a more springy step, swinging a grotesquely-twisted stick that he had picked up somewhere. The old dull abstraction was more marked when he sat nightly at the faro-table.

"Ye hyear me, gents? That thar walkin' bone-yard has brought ill-luck to Dakota Dan! Somehow or other he's standin' in his light!" insisted Burt Younger, whenever the subject was broached, and it became the general theme of conversation.

Day and night, in-doors and out, wherever there were two or three men grouped together, there was discussed the calamity which had overtaken the favorite of the camp.

Every morning the boys went to see him in a body. They were invariably let in by Sam Ling, who stood aside, as we have said, with his juuk-shoes at the same angle as his eyes, and his hands clasped before his blue blouse, wearing ever the same serene look of guileless innocence. Sometimes, when he seemed not to be observed, he sagged his head on one side and heaved a profound sigh.

"Even that pagan likes Dakota Dan!" said Burt Younger, and thereupon hurled an oath at the absent Undertaker.

"Whar's that galoot?" he demanded, with a scowl.

"San-le-sum?" asked the pagan, with a side-long glance out of the corner of his eye.

"Yes."

"Go uppee gulchee—lilly time gone."

"May the devil go with him!"

Dan lay with his eyes closed, and his thin arms resting outside of the blankets parallel with his body, panting with the short respirations of a very weak man.

"Jest look at him!" groaned Shep Lambert, his brows knit with distress. "He can't hold out long like this!"

"Much his pard cares—out skylarkin' by himself!" growled Burt.

Shep made no reply. The case was getting so desperate that even he no longer defended him as promptly as at the outset. Indeed, it had been rather an upholding of Dan's wishes. Personally Shep liked the Undertaker little, if any, better than the others.

Beside him stood Saphead Sam. He was very pale and restless, and his eyes were unnaturally distended, and kept roving about uneasily, while he stared at Dan, and then at every one in the room, catching at every syllable that fell from their lips.

No one was particularly struck by this. As he asked no questions, nor ventured any observations, he passed unnoticed.

But that night, or rather in the small hours of the next morning, after the saloons had closed their doors, and the last of the revelers had staggered to his bunk, or, if "ballasted above the water-line," had found free lodgings wherever he happened to fall, the sharp crack of a rifle was followed by a wild yelling and gibbering laughter, which roused the sleeping camp.

"What's the row?" asked Shep Lambert of the first man he met, as he rushed half-dressed into the street.

"Blowed if I know! It's up at Dakota Dan's, whatever it is."

The sound of boisterous talking and the interweaving of shadowy figures, only partially revealed by the flickering light of a candle before Dakota Dan's shanty, toward which others were hastening, sufficiently attested this.

"Has there been any fighting?" asked Shep, his misgivings shaping themselves on the incidents of the past month. "I was sound asleep when the thing commenced."

"I only heard one shot," was the answer.

"That's enough! They've fixed the Undertaker! I was afraid they'd try it on."

And he added an execration.

As he approached the spot, he made out Dakota Dan sitting on his own doorstep just as he had turned out of his sick bed in the alarm of the moment, so weak that he had to lean against the jamb of the door.

Sam Ling stood just within the doorway, screening the candle from the draught as much as possible, while throwing its light outside.

The Celestial was shaking with fear, the pupils of his eyes being drawn down into the inner corners of their bias-cut openings until he looked fairly cross-eyed.

Just before the doorway lay the motionless body of a man face-downward, and about it moved an excited group of miners.

Shep Lambert heard Burt Younger's voice raised above the rest.

"An' mighty well done, too!" he cried, with an oath. "I knowed it would have to come out sooner or later. It's lucky fur Dakota Dan that

he's got shut of him before he got him clean under ground!"

"Hal hal ha!" rose the shrill laugh of Saphead Sam. "Dan's all right now! Say, gents! he'll be up an' a-doin', won't he? We won't have no more—"

"Who done this?" cried Shep Lambert, hoarsely, as he burst through the crowd.

"Shep! Shep!" cried Dakota Dan, in a voice so weak and tremulous, in contrast with his wonted hearty tones, that the boys only groaned, "they've finished him!—they've downed my pard!"

"Who done it?" repeated Shep, glaring about.

"I done it!" cried Saphead Sam, coming forward proudly.

He still held in his hand the rifle with which he had done the fatal execution.

"You?" cried Shep.

"You bet I did! Oh! I'm more knowin' than I look! Eh, boys? Hal hal ha!"

"Yes, by gee, you be!" asserted Burt Younger.

"Say, Shep! You fellers never dropped to his leetle game, did ye? But I put this an' that together, an' I got him down fine! You can't fetch a vampire with no common bullets—I knowed that; but them's the boys that hunted him whar he lived!"

And diving his hand down in his pocket, he brought forth and shook in his palm a couple of silver bullets.

"Who put that thar notion into his fool head?" asked Shep, not angry with the imbecile, who indeed could not be held responsible; but scanning the faces of the men, and especially Burt Younger's, with perhaps natural suspicion.

"Don't give me the credit of it," said Burt. "I hadn't the sense to see through the doggone fraud, no more than you had. But jest listen to what the man with more savy than any other galoot in this hyar camp has got to say fur himself. Give it to 'em all over ag'in, Sam. It'll b'ar repeatin'."

"Yes! yes!" cried the men who had not been in time to hear the first narration. "Let's have the story. What is it all about?"

"Waal, ye see," began Sam, assuming the air of importance which his relation to the tragedy seemed to warrant, "I stand by Dakota Dan all the time! The man that strikes him hurts me! So when I seen this hyar galoot gittin' fat while Dan was gittin' thin, an' nothin' bein' done about it by nobody, I took it into my head to watch him."

"Waal, I noticed that every night he got his hungry look on, an' every mornin' he was as fresh as a daisy—"

"How's that?" interrupted Burt Younger. "I reckon thar ain't a man in the camp that hain't seen the same thing, time an' time ag'in—an' never dropped!" he added, in disgust. "Come, boys, don't be backward about acknowledgin' the corn. Speak up, an' own that it took a fool to larn us our A-B-C's!"

"Hang me ef I ain't seen the way he always went waltzin' along in the mornin'!" cried Joe Congar.

And when so staid a man as he declared in favor of Sam, of course every one else remembered—or persuaded himself that he did, which came to the same thing—something of the sort.

"Go on, go on!" said Burt.

And the boys echoed the request eagerly.

"Waal, then I seen that when the Undertaker was lookin' the freshest, Dan was the most used up."

"How's that, boys?" interrupted Burt.

"Co-rect," was the response.

"Drive ahead, Sappy!"

"So I fell to watchin' around hyar o' nights, to see what the Undertaker done to him to make him feel so bad."

"None of us hadn't the gumption to do that," groaned Burt.

"Waal, what did you discover?" asked Shep.

"Nothin' fur three or four nights. Everythin' was as black as a pocket in hyar. But last night I seen jest the tiniest bit of a speck of light. It wa'n't the size of a pin's head. But, gents, it was—"

Saphead Sam drew his body together in an attitude of fear, and lowering his voice to a hoarse whisper, said:

"Blue!"

"Aha! Ye all know what that thar means," cried Burt Younger.

The men exchanged glances and drew nearer together.

"I crep' up an' found that the winder was covered with a blanket, but thar was a leetle hole through it. I put my eye to that thar hole, an', gents, I seen what I don't never want to see ag'in! The room was full o' blue light—death light!—that wa'n't comin' from nowhar in pertickler, but jest all through the air like. An' thar was Dakota Dan a-layin' on the flat of his back in his bunk, a-breathin' hard, like a drunken man; an' thar, cross-legged, on his stummick, sets the devil, hoof, horns an' tail!"

Low, rumbling ejaculations of rage and fear escaped the auditors, who were drinking in the marvel open-mouthed.

"Thar he sets," continued the imbecile, his excitement growing more intense as he progressed, so that he illustrated his narrative with appropriate pantomime, bringing out the scene vividly before the imaginations of the men—"thar he sets, a-fannin' of him with his wings—slow, like this hyar! Fannin' him, an' fannin' him, so's he wouldn't wake up!"

"Gents, did you ever see the devil?" he asked, interrupting his narrative.

"What does he look like?" almost gasped one of the men.

"Waal, he's black all over—all but his eyes an' teeth an' finger-nails. They're an inch long, an' hooked, like claws. Then he has wings like a bat, with spurs-like at the joints. You never seen such wings! He kin stretch 'em out so's they ain't less'n four or five yard acrost! An' he has legs like a goat, shaggy on the hams, an' two leetle split hoofs."

"An' thar he sot, with his tail wrapped around in front of him, an' his leetle stumpy horns stickin' up straight an' his brows drawn down in the middle an' the ends stickin' up to beat the pagan's hyar—"

At this reference to Sam Ling every eye was turned toward him, to help out the imagination in reproducing the picture of the devil by the aid of his bias-cut eyes.

He shook so that he could hardly hold the candle.

"Thar he sot," continued Saphead Sam, and every eye was drawn back to him, to the not slight relief of the heathen.

"Did he have his pitchfork?" ventured one of the men.

"Oh, yes! He had his pitchfork in his hand. An' while he fanned an' fanned, he prodded Dakota Dan in the throat with one of the points."

Every eye at once sought Dakota Dan's throat for confirmatory evidence. They found it, or seemed to. There were several slight irritations there. Under other circumstances they would have been attributed to shaving. Now they were received as indisputable proof of Saphead Sam's statement.

"The tines were sharpened as keen as the point of a needle," went on the imbecile. "Thar wasn't a drop of blood drawn. But his eyes begins to glisten, an' his mouth begins to water, an' he clasps on to that spot with his lips! Gents, you never seen nothin' like it! Ef he was starvin' to death—"

But Burt Younger thought of a comparison which would convey a more vivid impression to the minds of the men.

"Ef he had been on a two-weeks' tear, boys, an' hadn't had a drop fur twenty-four hours to taper off on!" he suggested.

The boys understood how eagerly the vampire had applied his lips to the throat of his victim!

"Go on, Sappy—go on!" said Burt.

"Waal, Dakota Dan gits weaker an' weaker, an' jest as he's at the last gasp, *whisk* goes the vampire's tail off he jumps! out goes the blue lights—an' it's all as black as yer hat!"

At this effective *denouement* the bated breath of the audience exhales in a long-drawn sigh.

But Sam is not yet through.

"Then I heard Dakota Dan wake up an' call his pard. He turned out of his bunk, barkin' of his shins on a stool ur two, an' asks him how he's comin' on. You'd think his heart was broke by his voice. Dakota Dan said that a lime-kiln was a fool to the way he felt, as if he hadn't had a drop of anything to his tongue fur a dog's age. Then he strikes a light to git the water, an' thar he stands as fresh as if he had jest had a square meal, an' Dakota Dan as white an' thin as if he hadn't left a tin-cupful o' blood in his whole body!"

"Gents, you seen how Dakota Dan looked this mornin'," Burt supplemented. "Maybe ye kin tell us whether it is so that he called his pard as Sappy says."

As the attention of the crowd was thus directed toward Dakota Dan, Shep Lambert sprung to his side with a sharp cry, and caught him.

Dakota Dan fainted in his arms.

CHAPTER XV.

A BLOW IN THE DARK.

DAKOTA DAN was borne back to bed, where he was soon revived. In his weak state the reaction after undue excitement had left him with no strength to sustain him.

Assured that he was in no immediate danger,

the crowd returned to the consideration of the tragedy.

"I'm a square-toed man," said Burt Younger. "I always say what I mean an' mean what I say; an' thar ain't no back-down nor slide-out to me nohow. Hain't you always found me so, Shep Lambert?"

"Yes, I have," admitted Shep, freely.

"So fur, so good! Do you think it's in me to b'ar down on the Undertaker, ef I didn't believe he was about as low down as they make 'em?"

"I never denied," said Shep, "that you thought you was standin' by Dan fur his good."

"Putt 'er thar!" cried Burt, extending his hand. "I allow we're all honest men, ef we're only a mind to think so, an' want to do the fa'r thing all round. Ef we kin manage to pull together, we'll come out o' this thing right side up with care yit!"

Shep took the hand as frankly as it was offered.

"Now," pursued Burt, "this hyar thing is so, or it ain't so; an' Dakota Dan himself is the man to tell us. Let us go in an' put it to him, fa'r an' squar'. I, fur one, will stand by what he says."

To avoid the excitement of forcing a crowd upon the sick man, these two as representatives of the opposite interests went in.

Dakota Dan could recall all of the imbecile's story.

"Is it true that he put a blanket before your winder?" asked Burt.

"Yes."

"What fur?"

"I never thought to ask him, an' he didn't say."

"H'm! Did you call him up last night, as Sappy said you did?"

"Yes—that's so, boys. But—"

"An' use the very same words?" asked Shep.

"Waal, yes—almost word fur word as Sam put it. But, boys, that ain't to say that thar was anything crooked ur ornery about Saunderson. He was a squar' man, ef thar ever was one. You may put yer money on that."

Burt looked at Shep.

A gloomy frown and a compression of the lips showed that he had nothing further to offer.

Burt turned without a word further, and walked out of the room.

Shep was about to follow him as silently, when Dakota Dan called him back.

"It looks mighty bad, I know," he said; "but do what you kin fur him."

"I will," said Shep.

"Waal?" asked Burt, when he made his appearance without.

"I reckon thar ain't nothin' to do but to give him decent burial," he said.

Burt shook his head.

"We don't bury that kind!"

"What's that?" asked Shep, sharply.

"We'll take him out yonder among the crags, an' leave him to have it out with the coyotes. I reckon they'll find him a dose!"

"Dan's pard?" cried Shep.

Younger laughed derisively.

"I allow that thar's about played out!" he said. "We owe it to the fool o' the camp that

he ain't Dan's murderer. It's ten to one if we save him even now."

The crowd began to speak all at once, in their eagerness to indorse this sentiment, and their expression of opinion was plentifully interlarded with oaths of bitter indignation.

Shep Lambert found himself unable to stem the tide of universal hatred. The most that he could do was to prevent them from carrying out a proposition to drag the body to the place of abandonment by a rope about the neck.

"Dan's last words to me was to do what I could fur him, an' I promised him I would. Now, gents, you needn't touch a hand to him. Leave it all to me. I'll carry him whar you say, an' leave him thar; but let the thing be done without no unnecessary puttin' upon him. We've got to tell Dan all about this, remember, when he comes round; an' he won't thank the man that abused his pard."

That carried the day.

Shep made a litter and put the body on it, and Saphead Sam taking the other end, they carried it at the head of a gloomy-browed procession, their way lighted by torches, out of the camp and far up the gulch, where they abandoned it among the crags.

In silence they went; in silence they returned! Then Shep Lambert said:

"Gents, I'll take charge of Dan, an' you bet thar won't be no hocus-pocus in the way of his gittin' well under *my* management!"

This gave general satisfaction. Everybody had perfect confidence in Shep Lambert.

"An' now, Shep," said Younger, "ef thar's anything in this camp ur out of it, that kin be got at, that you want, jest say the word, an' every man in the camp will be at your orders to git it! You onderstand that, o' course."

"O' course!" assented Shep. "To begin with, then, I want a woman, and a woman that knows how to cook—nice leetle things, ye onderstand, that'll be temptin' to a sick man's appetite. What he wants is nursin'. This hyar heathen is all right fur men in their full vigor, what kin chaw wrought nails an' git the good out of 'em; but what does he know about gruel an' sich? I tell you, gents, thar's virtue in spoon-victuals, when a man's flat on his back. And he wants a woman to lift his head up when she gives him a drink, an' to turn his piller over when it's cool side down, as it is the heft o' the time."

The unusual excitement had brought out most of the women, and they stood about with shawls over their heads, shivering—with nervousness, since it was not cold.

Bessie Bright-eyes offered her services at once, with the confidence of one used to having the lead conceded to her. But Shep said:

"Your call is with well men, my dear. An' it would be a pity to take you away from the boys. This hyar is the style we want."

And he selected the most gentle-mannered of the group.

Sam Ling received his dismissal with the unruffled meekness of his race, his eyes downcast. It was impossible to discover whether he understood that there was no objection to him except that he had not the advantage of being a woman.

Every one in Canyon City felt a gnawing

curiosity as to the ultimate fate of the Undertaker; but it is doubtful whether the boldest of them could have been hired to go alone, even in broad daylight, to the spot where his body had been left.

Saphead Sam's very simplicity, however, sharpened his curiosity and blunted his fear: so, shouldering his rifle, loaded with a silver bullet, he might have been seen prowling about the spot before the sun was an hour high. What was his surprise to find not a trace of the body!

He ran to the camp with this proof of the supernatural character of the man who had come into their midst almost as strangely as he had gone out of it.

The whole camp poured pell-mell up the gulch, to find his statement true.

If still further confirmation was needed, it was found in the fact that Dakota Dan began to mend from that night.

The boys were delighted as they marked how rapidly he convalesced.

"Why, ye kin see him grow better!" shouted Burt Younger. "Won't this hyer camp have one glorious drunk the day he fu'st puts his foot outside o' that thar door! An' we won't have long to wait, nuther. Ye byear me, gents!"

The whole camp joined in this jubilation. Every morning Dakota Dan held a "reception," in which his friends passed in single file through his shanty, in at the front door and out of the back, to have a look at him and congratulate him on his improvement since the day before. Outside they shook hands, swinging round and round, and executing a kind of grotesque, triumphal dance.

But though his body grew strong, the wound to his spirit caused by Colorado Kate's treachery did not heal, and the old light did not return to his eye.

Thus matters progressed, until at the end of a week the day so eagerly looked forward to arrived, and Dakota Dan "set his foot outside his door."

It was celebrated as Burt Younger had predicted. The whole camp "took a day off."

Dakota Dan's shanty was the scene of the revel, and all day every one was in and out at pleasure.

An hour before sundown they "let up on him," so that he could get much needed rest, and transferred the rejoicing to the Ace of Hearts, which had been under the care of Burt Younger since the tragedy.

There things were "boomin'," when the more or less tipsy crowd were startled by the sudden appearance of Saphead Sam, who rushed into their midst, shouting:

"Gents! gents! thar's somethin' wrong over to Dakota Dan's! Don't stop fur nothin' but jest pile over thar as quick as ever ye kin."

"What's the matter?" cried Burt Younger.

"I don't know. But they're a-pukin' over thar—all hands of 'em—fit to turn their insides out."

The crowd was sober with consternation by this announcement.

"Fur God's sake, boys!" cried Burt, "some o' you take a boss an' strike out fur Twin Bluffs fur the doctor!"

And he ran at the top of his speed to Dakota Dan's shanty, followed by the crowd.

Bursting into the house, he found Dan, Shep and the nurse writhing in anguish, their livid and clammy faces and protruding eyes making a horrible spectacle of distress.

The close agreement of symptoms proved that their illness must have a common cause.

"In heaven's name, Shep! what's the matter with you all?" cried Younger.

"Burt, we've got our dose!" gasped Shep, between two paroxysms of violent retching.

"But how? What have ye been doin' to yerselves?"

"It's our supper done it, I reckon. Oh, my God!"

There stood the fatal meal, half eaten. Who could have guessed that in those tempting viands lurked the seeds of death in one of its most horrible forms?

"P'ison!" gasped Burt, for the moment paralyzed by the shock of that fearful revelation.

"P'ison!" passed from lip to lip, as the men stared helplessly from the food to the sufferers, and then at each other.

Among their sturdier bodies white-faced women squeezed their way, to utter cries of sympathetic distress and to make distracted efforts to relieve the sufferings that lay beyond their reach.

"Oh, something ought to be done—something must be done!" cried one of their number, wringing her hands and appealing to the equally helpless men with streaming eyes. "We cannot see them die—oh, so horribly—before our very eyes!"

"Somethin' shall be done!" cried Burt Younger, rising to the occasion. "Have out every hoss in the camp, men; an' the fu'st man in Twin Bluffs to-night will never be furgotten in Canyon City! Tell the doctor it's p'ison—an' that his time's worth a hundred dollars a minute to him, fur every minute he cuts inside of an hour! But, my God!" he groaned, "whar will they be in an hour's time?"

He himself set out to take the best horse he could find and join in that desperate race against swift-footed death!

But even as he strode toward the door, a wild shout was set up outside.

He sprang across the threshold to see the figure of a woman with streaming hair rushing toward the shanty, through the crowd.

"Cl'ar the way!" went up the shout. "Fur God's sake, let her pass!"

The crowd fell apart as she sped forward, to close in behind her, forming a surging, jostling mass that in vain sought to follow her flying steps.

"Who is it?"

"Has she brought the medicine?"

"What's the matter with her? Didn't you see? She was all covered with blood!"

"What did she say?"

A hundred questions sprung up all in an instant, which nobody thought of answering.

But the woman sped on until she stumbled across the threshold and sunk upon her knees in the middle of the room, gasping:

"Dakota! Dakota! Oh, God! I am too late!—too late!—too late! O-o-oh!"

And her distress died away in a long-drawn wail of inexpressible anguish.

She would have sunk forward on her face, but that Burt Younger sprung to her side and caught her, crying:

"Kate! Kate! can it be you! Merciful heaven! where have you been, and what has happened to you? Has the world gone mad? What is comin' upon us all?"

The woman had no answer for him. She hung unconscious across his arm.

But some half-caught articulations haunted his memory. What was it she had tried to say? Was it really her speech, or only his own thoughts, that echoed through the chambers of his bewildered mind?

"Sam Ling!—poison!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TEST OF GUILT.

AGAIN the room was filled by the eager crowd, and the doorway made a spectacle of heads craning one above another.

For the moment the old interest was lost in this new and strange development.

From Bessie Bright-eyes's account the story had spread through the camp that Colorado Kate had eloped with Billy Hart, the seemingly needless stealth of which was afterward explained by the women who had seen how Dakota Dan was affected by Bessie's announcement of the fact.

And now Kate was back, covered with cuts and bruises, and with her clothes half-torn off of her, as if she had passed through a terrific struggle. And of all persons, she had rushed to Dakota Dan.

What could it all mean?

The sight of her for the time overcome Dakota Dan's terrible pain, and he stretched out his hand toward her, crying feebly:

"Kate! Kate!"

But she was past knowing aught of him—even him she loved so truly.

"What did she say?" he asked.

"She came to warn you of that yaller-mugged heathen!" said Burt. "Thar's been a deep game goin' on hyar, right under our noses! He has poisoned all of you—why, the deuce, his master, only knows—an' cut an' hacked her almost to pieces!"

Burt groaned as he said it, still holding her in his arms.

"My God!" escaped from Dakota Dan's tremulous lips.

Then he said:

"Fetch her hyar, Burt."

Younger complied.

"Put her on the bunk, hyar, beside me."

It was done.

Her disheveled hair, sodden in places with her own blood, stained his pillow.

He put his arm about her, and drew her besmirched face down to his, kissing her now unresponsive lips, her cold cheek, her closed eyes, her marble-like forehead.

"We kin die together, my darlin'!" he whispered into her unconscious ear, yet so low that no one else might hear. "God forgive me fur ever doubtin' you fur a minute! I might have known that somethin'—somethin' or other was

up, only that you— Why, it was like sunshine! I wonder ef I would be fool enough to believe it because somebody told me it was black!"

But Burt Younger's inference had passed from lip to lip, increasing in volume and gathering fury with every repetition.

"It's the heathen Chineel! He has p'is'd Dakota Dan an' the rest, an' hacked Colorado Kate all to bits!"

"It's his revenge because Shep Lambert fired him!" was the ready explanation of his motive.

"No sooner do we git shut of the Undertaker, than he puts in his bid."

Then suddenly rose a terrible cry—a cry compared with which the yelping of wolves as they strike the trail of a wounded deer is music! It shot up into the air as if the hatchway had been lifted from the mouth of the nether pit! It sent a thrill to every heart, and silenced all other sounds! The crowd stood breathless!

Again it rose, the multitudinous voice of murderous hatred! Then came a response—the shrill shriek of human terror!

The spell was broken. The crowd burst into one roaring voice of ruthless rage, and rushed away like pent waters o'erleaping a dam.

Away! away sped the mad chasel—one helpless wretch, wild-eyed, panting, frantic with terror, leading a howling, yelling, shrieking mob—purple in the face, with eyes glaring like those of a beast of prey, almost foaming at the mouth with fury!

With fierce cries and savage execrations they incite one another on, until they close in upon their victim.

He is down! They swarm about him like dogs that have brought their quarry to bay! A score of hands seize him! They fall over him! They trample him under foot! They snatch him up again—not to save him from harm, but that he may not escape them too easily through the gates of death!

He is but a shrinking, quivering mass of flesh, through which the soul seems to ooze at every gasp!

They drag him back to camp and to the shanty where his supposed victims lie.

It is a horrible pilgrimage! He runs the gantlet of glances so fierce that it seems as if they must sear!—of execrations so bitter that the wonder is that the quailing soul can support them—of blows that torture, yet do not kill!

Burt Younger's purpose, to send after the doctor as many riders as there were horses in the camp, having been interrupted by the unexpected appearance of Colorado Kate, was recalled as soon as he had placed her beside her lover.

While Sam Ling was leading nearly the whole camp at his heels, Burt detained as many as he wanted, and hurried them into the saddle.

But there was one beforehand with them. While they were going for the animals, they were surprised to see Bessie Bright-eyes dash away on the fleetest of Dakota Dan's four.

"I will show you that a woman can outstrip you all!" she cried. "Overtake me who can!"

They cheered her. The men of Canyon City were proud of their women.

"Thar's pluck fur ye, as well as good looks!" cried one.

"God speed you!" called out Burt Younger, looking after her admiringly.

She dashed through the crowd who were dragging back the cowering Chinaman.

Cheers greeted her approaching; cheers followed her speeding away.

They kept on to the shanty.

"Fetch out that thar grub!" was their demand. "This hyar sneakin' coyote shall bolt his own medicine!"

Ready hands fetch out the suspected food, and while some hold up the shivering wretch to keep him from falling into a heap on the ground, others prepare to force the food down his throat.

"Hold on, boys!" interposed Burt Younger. "You'll choke him that way. Let him eat by himself."

"That's the ticket! Ef he's innercent, an' hain't doctored it, good fair steak won't gag him!"

The tin plate bearing the remains of Dakota Dan's supper was held before him, a knife and fork were forced into his hands, and every eye glared upon him to note the effect.

The Chinaman unquestionably stared at the food with protruding eyeballs, and shrunk back as if he thought that they intended to poison him.

At that a fierce yell of conviction went up from a hundred throats. It did not seem to occur to them that under precisely those circumstances perhaps few men would have eaten with any sort of relish.

"Jest look at the snoozer!" shouted one of their number. "He knows that he put enough in thar to lay out an army. Ram it down his throat!"

In that hour of insane fury this suggestion was actually proceeded upon. While the Chinaman's head was held back, and his mouth was kept open by the insertion of a stick between his teeth, the food was forced down his gullet with a ramrod.

In this way, though half-dead, he was made to receive as much of the various kinds of food as the others had eaten.

That nothing might be omitted, the tea of which they had drank was poured into his mouth; and of course compelled him to swallow it, since no one can voluntarily suspend the breath to the point of suffocation.

In a few minutes he showed the same symptoms as the others. He was undoubtedly poisoned.

"That clinches it! Boys, let's burn the rat-eatin' whelp!"

But before this could be acted upon—and the chances were favorable to an adoption of it, barbarous as it was—a party of horsemen swept into the camp.

At sight of them the very skies were rent with the shout of welcome that went up!

Those in the rear of the cavalcade were swinging their hats and yelling at the top of their lungs. They were the men whom Burt had sent for the doctor, already returning before they would have had time to cover half the distance to Twin Bluffs.

Nevertheless the physician rode in advance of them, which showed that they must have met him on the road.

But who was it riding abreast with the doctor? He sat in his saddle erect, in a firm seat. His face was cold and emotionless. He—

"Gents! it's the Undertaker!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE UNDERTAKER VINDICATED.

COLORADO KATE had recovered consciousness. Her first act was to wind her arms about Dakota Dan's neck, laughing and crying together, while she rained kisses upon his face and poured a perfect flood of endearing terms upon him.

"Oh, you have got me back again!" she cried. "Are you glad? Have you pined for me as I have hungered and thirsted for you?"

"More than I can ever tell you in all our life long!" he answered.

At that she nearly smothered him!

"And you didn't believe her?—not one word? Oh, Dan! I have been so tortured with the fear that you would accept appearances against me."

But here his malady helped him out of an awkward answer.

The pain he had fought against now overcame him, and he writhed again.

Returning to consciousness in his arms, she had not recalled her first fears; but now she sprung up with a horrified cry.

"Oh! you have taken the poison? I am too late with my warning? Oh, Dan!"

But the clatter of hoofs broke upon her ear.

"Thank God! they have come! It is the doctor!" she cried.

At a bound she was through the doorway.

The horses were drawn up sharply, scattering the dirt in every direction, and their riders at the same instant swung themselves to the ground.

"Come in! come in! You have not a moment to spare! He has taken the poison! Oh! do not let him die!" she cried, catching the doctor by the arm, and fairly dragging him into the shanty.

She had but one person in her thoughts. She did not let go of him until she had brought him to Dakota Dan's bedside.

A rapid yet perfectly self-possessed examination satisfied him of the condition of his patients, and he began the work of neutralizing the poison.

"He will live?" gasped Kate.

"We have every reason to hope so," replied the physician.

She fell upon her knees in tearful thanksgiving.

Meanwhile the Undertaker had dismounted, and would have entered the shanty, to see his partner, but that Burt Younger, who thus far had stood staring at him in half-incredulous and altogether apprehensive astonishment, sprung before him.

"Hold on, boss," he said. "This hyar may be all right; but we want to know it before you go in thar."

Saunderson yielded without protest, and stepped back to his horse.

He was pale with the loss of blood, or, as one of the men hinted to his neighbor, from not having had an opportunity lately to replenish his stock in his peculiar way.

His eyes were sunk deep in his head, and glit-

tered as they had done when he first made his appearance in the camp.

But he was unquestionably alive in the flesh.

Saphead Sam stood staring at him. He had his rifle in hand; but he had lost faith in it.

"It was silver. I cast 'em myself," he kept repeating. "But he's come back to life! I never heard of such a thing. 'Tain't no use to try to fix him. Nobody could hit him fairer than I did."

"We'll try ef thar's any vartue in fire, next time!" said one of the men, grimly.

"Cap, what's to be done with this chap?" asked one of those who had Sam Ling in charge.

"Let's tie him back to back with the Undertaker, an' roast the pair of 'em!"

But Colorado Kate had come forth in time to overhear this proposal.

"Good heavens!" she cried, "have you all turned into a lot of savages? You ought to get down on your knees and ask the pardon of this injured man. If Dan lives, you will owe it to him."

And going up to the Undertaker, she slipped her arm through his, hugging it to her gratefully.

"What's that?" asked Burt Younger.

"To think that you would carry your senseless prejudice so far as to attempt his life! What is the matter with you all?"

"Senseless prejudice? An' him a-sucking Dan as dry as a squeezed lemon?"

"Nonsense! How could great men like you listen to so stupid a superstition?"

"Didn't Sappy see him?"

"A fool! You confess him one every time you call him by the handle you yourselves have given him."

"But wasn't Dan gittin' well right along tell this heathen devil downed him ag'in?"

"Was there ever such a chapter of blunders? Why Sam Ling is as innocent as you or I!"

"Come, now! you can't tell us that! We've got him dead to rights. An' you said it was him yourself."

"I? Never!"

"When you fu'st come in?"

"Indeed I did not!"

"Ask Burt Younger."

"Very well, ask him. Do you mean to say that I accused the Chinaman of poisoning Dakota Dan?"

Burt was scratching his head in confusion.

"Waal," he said, "it sounded so to me, an' that's a fact."

Colorado Kate made an effort to recall what she could have said. At last a light broke over her face.

"Why," she exclaimed, "I must have started to tell you that Sam Ling was in the habit of leaving Dan's herb tea to cool at night on the shelf in the open shed, where Big-fisted Frank could get at it and dose it with poison."

"Big-fisted Frank!" exclaimed her hearers. "What call had he to drop onto Dakota Dan so rough as that?"

"Why, you know that he always hated the Undertaker, and the night that Dan bluffed him so, he swore that he would get even with them both, somehow. So he was just in position to

stand in with Hank Sullivan, and has been playing into his hands ever since."

"The p'ison might make Dan thin, but it wouldn't make the Undertaker fat," objected one of the men.

"He was half-starved when he fell in with Dan. He had been out prospecting, and hadn't had a square meal for weeks. Is there anything unusual in that?"

"Waal, the pagan owned up to his share in it, any way!"

"Because, after you had chased him like a pack of wolves, he was afraid to eat what you were so bent on forcing down his throat? Do any of you eat in that way as a rule?"

The men stood abashed. Things began to take quite a different appearance from what they had supposed possible.

"Then who done it?" asked one.

"The Big Fist. I reckon you won't find him hanging around, as you did the Chinaman!"

"Look a-hyar! How do you come to know all this, when you wa'n't hyar to see it a-goin' on?"

"Hank Sullivan has held me a prisoner—"

"Why, they had it that you had slid with Billy Hart."

"So said Bessie Bright-eyes, because Hank Sullivan hired her to, and— Well, never mind why else. She had her own reasons. Can you tell me where she is now?"

"Give us the slip, boys!"

"On Dakota Dan's spriest hoss, too!"

"An' we cheered her!"

"Like blamed fools!"

"Oh, Lord! how she must have laughed in her sleeve!"

"Well," pursued Kate, "Hank Sullivan kept me posted on what was going on here—it doesn't concern you to know why."

"An' you mean to say that it was Hank an' the Big Fist that was at the bottom of all this hyar?" asked Burt Younger, his keen chagrin appearing in the expression of his face.

"Of course I do."

"An' the Undertaker—"

"It was lucky for me and all of those people in there that Saphead Sam's bullet didn't finish him, as also that you hadn't the humanity to put him under ground. He came to, and though of course he didn't know which of you had shot him, he did know that his life wasn't safe among you. So he had cut the camp for good, when chance threw him in the way of overhearing Hank Sullivan tormenting me. Then he dropped on him, and after as tough a fight as you ever saw, downed him for good and all in this world. Then he went for the doctor, and I kept on here."

Burt Younger walked up to the Undertaker and took off his hat before him.

"I hain't got much to say," he stammered; "but I jest want ye to know that I never felt so 'way down in my boots sence the day I was born! I don't know how to make it up to ye; but I'm powerful glad that things ain't no worse."

For the first time since they had known him, the boys saw the Undertaker smile faintly.

"Let us say no more about it," he suggested, extending his hand.

"What's that?" exclaimed Burt.
 "Why not? You ain't too proud—"
 "Proud! After what I've done to ye?"
 "But we weren't going to say anything more about that, you know."

"Look hyar! I don't deserve this!"
 "We don't all get our deserts in this world," said the Undertaker, with a faint sigh.

"No! by thunder, we don't! You hain't got your deserts sence you struck this hyar camp!"

And Burt struck his hand into that of the man whose determined foe he had thus far been.

"Maybe the boys will make it up to me when they come to know me better," said the Undertaker.

"Ef they don't—one and all!—we'll break their infernal necks! Hyar, you fellers, walk up to the captain's office, take the hand of the whitest man we've had in the camp sence the fu'st pick was struck into the ground, and tell him that you are ashamed o' yourselves, as I do now, an' as Colorado Kate said we'd orter do!"

And the camp to a man filed past the Undertaker, doffed their hats and shook him by the hand, declaring their regrets for the past, and pledging their friendship in the future.

Saphead Sam alone had not come forward. He stood staring, as if unable to comprehend the reason of this change of popular sentiment.

The Undertaker went up to him and extended his hand.

"No doubt he was honest enough in his story," he explained to the crowd. "You know the disordered state of his mind. It is not an unusual thing for him to see strange visions. Something he heard said must have worked on his imagination, and his anxiety to protect his friend did the rest."

"Yes," groaned Burt Younger, "somethin' he heard me say—the biggest fool of the two, by long odds!"

Through the open door of the shanty, Dakota Dan saw the honors to his pard, and called out:

"Consarn ye! ye wouldn't take my word fur it!"

Then the mistake was explained to the Chinaman, reparation was promised him, and he was given into the hands of the doctor.

An effective antidote put all the sufferers "on their feet" again; and Canyon City had a "grand blow-out" over their recovery.

Later, Colorado Kate, whose injuries, not so severe as they at first appeared, had been received in her struggle with Hank Sullivan, told in confidence to her lover what she had not cared to make public.

Hank Sullivan had had a passion for her before Dakota Dan declared himself, and by slowly poisoning Dan he had tried to torture her into consenting to marry him—Sullivan.

"But you didn't believe her, did you, Dan?" concluded Kate.

"Lemme see!" said Dan, with a twinkle in his eye. "Seems to me that I remember a young lady who once had a fancy that I had a notion fur Bes—"

"If you say another word, I'll—"

"Waal, then, let's don't say nothin' more about it, sence we're so near squar'!"

At this juncture the "queer pard" came upon the lovers unexpectedly, and stood looking at them with a smile as kindly as it was quiet in his eyes.

Next to Dakota Dan, he was now the most popular man in Canyon City Camp.

THE END.

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